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in a Country
French Menu**

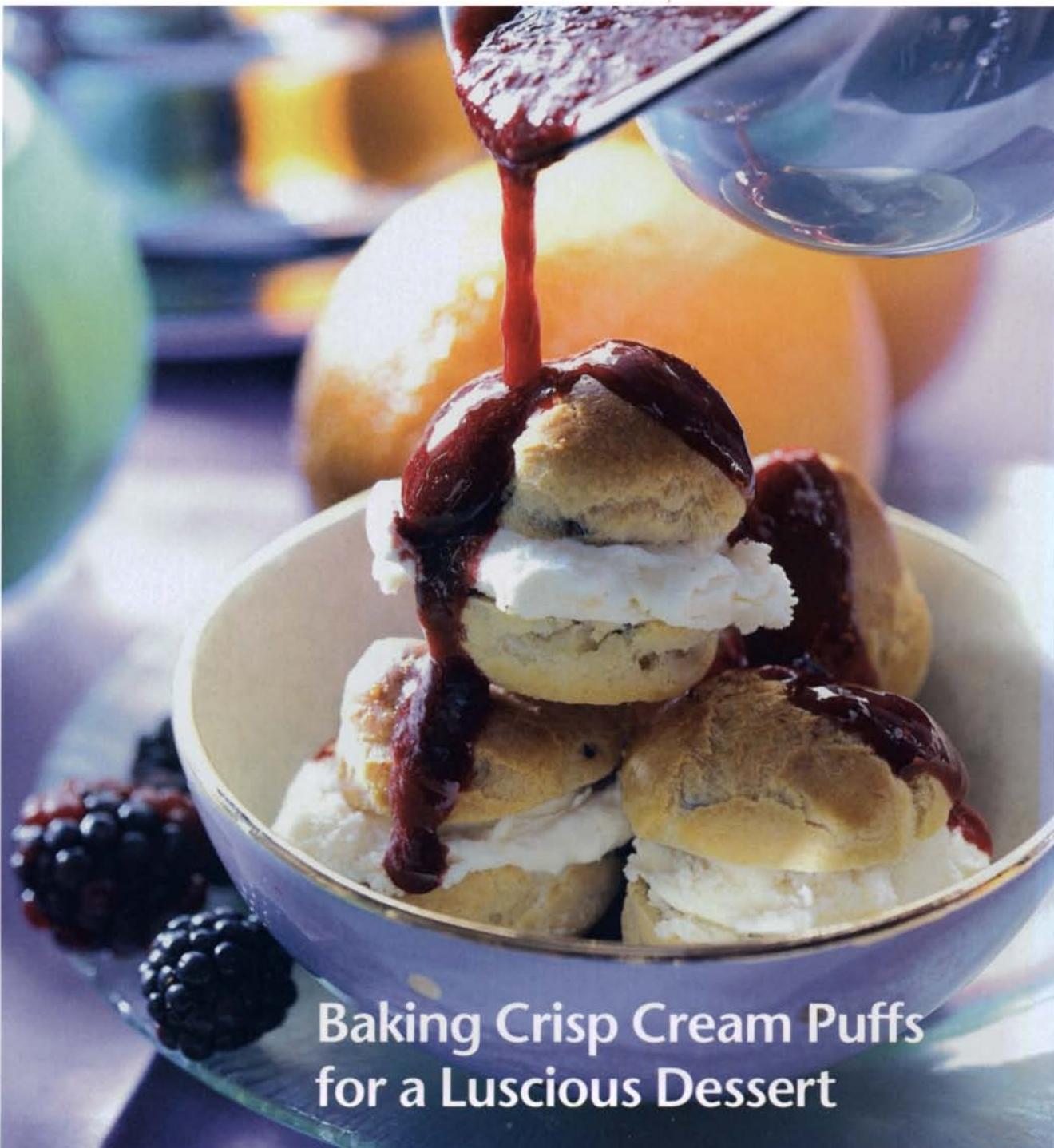
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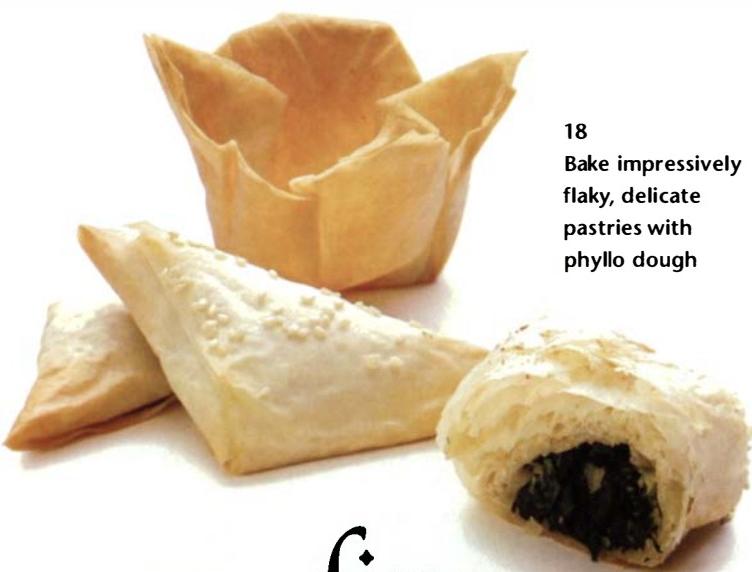
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APRIL/MAY 1997 ISSUE 20



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with a French menu
featuring a fragrant
stew brimming with tender
seasonal vegetables

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On the cover: Chocolate-Lined Profiteroles with Blackberry Sauce, "Master Class," p. 66.

Cover photo, Alan Richardson. These pages: top left, Scott Phillips; bottom left, Ben Fink; above and below: Alan Richardson.



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Make fabulous
burgers with
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and a light touch
with seasoning,
shaping, and
cooking

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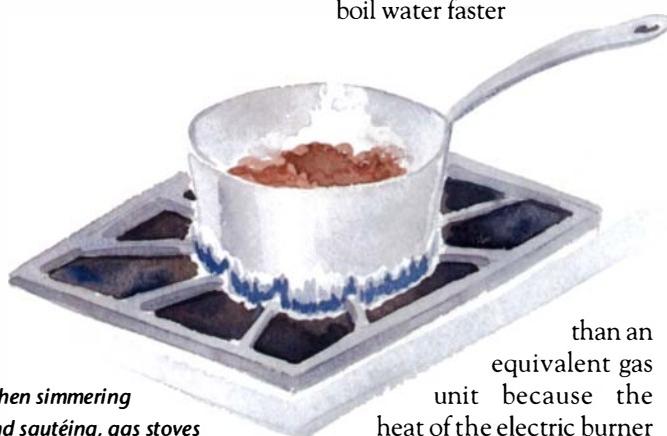
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a lot more of them.



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When simmering and sautéing, gas stoves offer better heat control than electric burners.

Fine Cooking welcomes article proposals from our readers. We acknowledge all submissions, return those we can't use, and pay for articles we publish. Send proposals to Fine Cooking, PO Box 5506, Newtown, CT 06470-5506.

Comparing gas and electric power

In the Q&A column of *Fine Cooking* #15, a reader who was buying a new range asked how to compare Btu to watts. The answer given, that there is no direct comparison, is erroneous. First, the correct term is Btu *per hour*, not just Btu, which seems to be the shorthand term used by the appliance industry. The difference is important: Btu per hour is a measure of power, and that's what you're looking for when you want to know how fast something will heat. Second, there's a very simple relationship between power in watts and power in Btu per hour: 1000 watts equals 3413 Btu per hour.

As far as how well each performs, an electric burner will boil water faster

than an equivalent gas unit because the

heat of the electric burner is much more efficiently conducted to the liquid, uneven pan bottom or not. Where gas excels is in heat control for sautéing and simmering.

—Richard Tabbutt, via e-mail

Remove the wishbone for easier carving

I have read the piece on carving a turkey (Technique Class, *Fine Cooking* #18), and I would like to offer a method that has greatly facilitated the carving of the breast meat.

This is to remove the wishbone prior to cooking. If you palpate the slender bones beneath the neck flap, you can easily divest them of flesh with a sharp boning knife. Then twist briskly to detach the top of the bones, and the entire wishbone will come away neatly. When carving the bird, the knife won't encounter the difficult dip caused by an intact wishbone.

—Mrs. B. V. Wand,
Essex, England

Mineral oil conquers rust

Just received another great issue of *Fine Cooking* (#18). In Q&A, the answer about how to prevent rusty baking pans needs a little more explanation. Therusty patches, unless severely pitted, can be removed with steel wool. To keep any steel or cast-iron pan from rusting, simply wipe with a very light coat of mineral oil. Mineral oil won't turn rancid as will vegetable oils, nor will it get sticky from buildup. It's available at most pharmacies.

—Joseph H. Clarke, Jr.,
via e-mail

You left out my favorite pan

I was surprised not to have seen Magnalite by General Housewares mentioned in the article on pots and pans in *Fine Cooking* #18. It's the best cookware I've ever used, and when you order, the company pays the freight. Check it out.

—Bill Moran, San Diego, CA

Erratum

In *Fine Cooking* #19, we incorrectly credited photos on the cover and on pp. 36–37. They were taken by Mark Thomas. Our apologies. ♦

fine COOKING

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When to add onions to beans

Is it true that, when cooking dried beans, you shouldn't include an onion because it somehow prevents the beans from softening?

—Tristan Hughes,
Narberth, PA

Allison Scherer replies: No. Adding seasonings such as onions and garlic while the beans cook will have no adverse effect. But what you should not add during cooking is salt or anything acidic—tomatoes, vinegar, wine, or citrus juices, for example—as these do interfere with the softening of the beans. In a salty or acidic environment, the

bean's seed coat toughens and the bean's cell walls become less soluble. Acidic ingredients and salt should be added only after the beans are almost tender. And if you cook beans in broth, make sure it has a low salt content.

Allison Scherer is a spokesperson for BEAN, the Bean Education and Awareness Network.

A smooth roux

Every time I make a roux-based sauce, the results are thin and watery. Why? Also, can you make a roux with whole-wheat flour? I've tried and it turns into a pasty mess.

—Suzi Winson, Malibu, CA

Molly Stevens replies: When you thicken a sauce with roux, pay attention to proportions. By definition, a roux is made of flour and butter in equal parts by weight, not volume. A cooked roux should have the consistency of wet sand at low tide.

Also, the standard proportion to liquid is 4 ounces of roux (half butter, half flour) to 1 quart liquid for a medium-thick sauce.

Don't judge the thickness of a sauce immediately because it thickens as it simmers.

If you want thicker results, adjust the recipe to include more roux or let the sauce gently reduce by additional simmering. No matter how much roux you use, be sure to simmer for at least 30 minutes to remove any floury taste.

A roux darkens as it cooks, and a darker roux won't thicken as effectively as a lighter one. Roux's ability to thicken a sauce is based on its starch content, and starch content is highest in soft, white flour. Whole-wheat flour contains both wheat bran, which is high in fiber, and wheat germ, which is high in fat. While whole-wheat flour is nutritionally valuable, I'd advise against using it in a roux: the wheat bran and germ it contains hinder the flour's thickening potential.

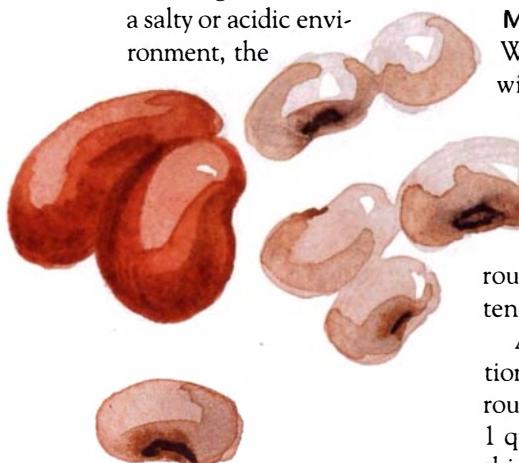
Molly Stevens is a contributing editor to *Fine Cooking*.

Why does vinegar curdle milk?

Why does vinegar curdle milk? Would adding pickled capers to a cream sauce curdle it?

—Iris A. Brown,
Kerhonkson, NY

Shirley O. Corriher replies: Acid on protein causes the protein to coagulate, because



Add salty and acidic ingredients to beans near the end of cooking time or the beans may toughen.

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the acid is actually "cooking" the protein strands. When vinegar curdles milk, what you get is a milk-product version of scrambled eggs.

As to whether pickled capers cause a cream sauce to curdle, that depends on what else is in the sauce. If the sauce has a reasonable amount of starch, it shouldn't curdle, since the starch should prevent the acid from coagulating the proteins in the cream. If you want to be certain, mix 1/2 cup cold milk with a teaspoon of cornstarch, heat, stirring, until thickened, and then add some of the pickled capers.

Adding an acidic ingredient to heavy cream doesn't usually cause curdling. The

cream has very few proteins and a lot of fat to coat them. When in doubt, a little cornstarch is always good insurance to prevent curdling. And you should always rinse the capers.

Shirley O. Corriher, a contributing editor to Fine Cooking, teaches food science and cooking classes across the country.

Don't boil ribs bound for the barbecue

When cooking ribs on the grill, should you boil them first?

—Andy Athey,
Fort Lauderdale, FL

John Willingham replies:
Not if you want to call it barbecue. When you boil a slab



If the meat is partially cooked before you put it over the fire, it isn't really barbecue.

of ribs, you boil the juices and flavor right out. Many restaurants boil or bake their ribs and then baste or slather them with heavy coatings of sauce, but to call this barbecue is ludicrous.

Barbecue is meat that has been dry-rubbed or marinated and then cooked over indirect heat from a hardwood, charcoal, or wood-pellet fire in a cooker; it must be cooked at temperatures between 185° and 250°F until the meat

has been rendered of excessive fat and is as tender as a mother's love. Basting during the cooking process is all right; in some cases, it's a must to keep the meat from drying out too much.

John Willingham wrote John Willingham's World Champion Bar-B-Q (William Morrow, 1996). ♦

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Choosing Onions, from Mild and Sweet to Spicy Hot

Onions are a supermarket staple, but don't take them for granted. Think how often you begin cooking dinner by chopping a few. If you take a look at what's offered in the onion department, you'll see that you have a lot of varieties to choose from.

You'll find two basic types: fresh and storage. These two categories encompass a wide range of shapes, sizes, colors, and flavors. Depending on the season and the variety, onions may be mild or spicy hot, sweet or quite pungent. Some onions taste best raw and lose their flavor when cooked. Others are too pungent to ever eat raw, but become mellow and sweet when cooked. The type of onion you choose depends on how you plan to use it.



Vidalia, Maui, and Walla Walla (fresh, from left) are some of the popular sweet onion varieties; each has its own distinct flavor. Their main season is April through June, though Wallas are available through mid-August, and Vidalias are sometimes available in October and November. These onions are delicious raw in salads or on top of a grilled hamburger.

Early in April, the first fresh onions arrive. Named after the regions where they're grown. Walla Walla, Vidalia, Maui, and Texas 1015 SuperSweets are some of the more popular varieties of fresh onions. Particularly succulent and not at all hot, these onions are prized for their fruity sweetness.

These early onions have thin, shiny skins, a high water content, and scant amounts of the sulfur compounds that make other onions so pungent. They're mild and sweet with a texture that's both juicy and crisp.

Though leeks and scallions are available year-round, they're also included in the fresh onion category because they don't go through a curing process.

Look for sweet onions that are firm and crisp. They should have short



Spring onions (fresh) are sold in bunches with their tubular stems still attached. They're entirely edible and at their best when raw. A crisp texture and clean, mild flavor makes them ideal in salads. Use them soon after you buy them; they'll keep in the refrigerator for about three days. Look for spring onions in May and June.



Leeks (fresh) are succulent with a sweet, delicate flavor. Look for slender ones, with fresh green tops and smooth white bases. Small leeks are delicious grilled whole. Use larger ones in soups and stews. Always clean leeks carefully, as they tend to be gritty. Fall, winter, and spring are the peak times for leeks, but most stores carry them year-round.



Scallions (fresh) have a fresh onion flavor that's slightly assertive. These are wonderful raw and are often used as a garnish. Available year-round, they're at their peak in May and June. Red scallions are especially tasty and have a crunchy texture.

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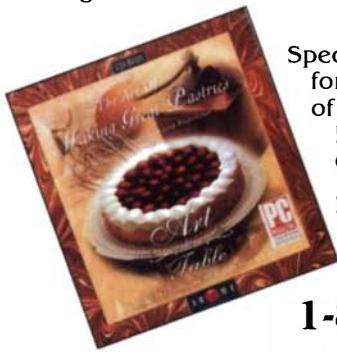
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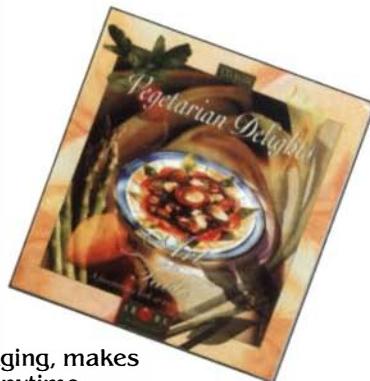
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AT THE MARKET

necks and dry, thin skins. Scallions and leeks should have fresh green tops and firm white bases.

Fresh onions have a short shelf life. Buy only what you can use quickly because they won't last long. Refrigerate them in the vegetable crisper for up to a week.

Freshly harvested onions are mild enough to eat raw and are ideal for adding to salads and sandwiches. Their delicate flavor won't hold up to long-cooked preparations, but they're delicious cooked quickly on the grill, roasted whole, or

battered and fried to make onion rings.

STORAGE ONIONS ARE AVAILABLE YEAR-ROUND

Picked at the peak of the summer harvest season, storage onions are "cured" by a drying process that gives them their familiar dry, papery skin. This skin protects the onion during shipping and helps prevent decay. Storage onions are firmer and have less water than fresh onions; they also have a much stronger, more pungent flavor.

Keep storage onions in a cool, dry, well-ventilated spot. You'll be able to use

them for as long as a month. Sunlight speeds the production of chlorophyll, which will turn onions green and make them taste bitter, so it's best to keep your onions in the dark.

Heat enhances the sugar in storage onions and makes them much less pungent. Cook them slowly and they'll bring a rich, robust onion flavor to your braises and stews.

USE CUT ONIONS FAST

All onions oxidize when cut,

and the longer cut raw pieces are exposed to air, the more they oxidize and develop off flavors. Slice onions just before you plan to use them. If you're cooking them, get the onions in the hot pan as soon as you've cut them. Onions to be eaten raw can be sliced and kept in ice water for several hours before serving. An ice-water bath will also tame the taste of a too-hot onion.

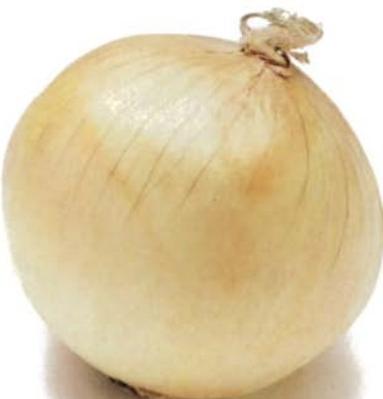
Sibella Kraus is the executive director of the San Francisco Public Market Collaborative and the Ferry Plaza Farmers' Market. ♦



Cipollini (storage) are small, flattened spheres popular in Italy. They have a well-developed flavor that's slightly sweet. Traditionally served whole in a sweet-and-sour sauce, they're also good marinated or made into pickles.



Shallots (storage) are crisp with a refined, delicate flavor, more intense than onions but also less hot. They can be eaten raw in salads and are often added to vinaigrettes. Try them roasted or grilled on a steak.



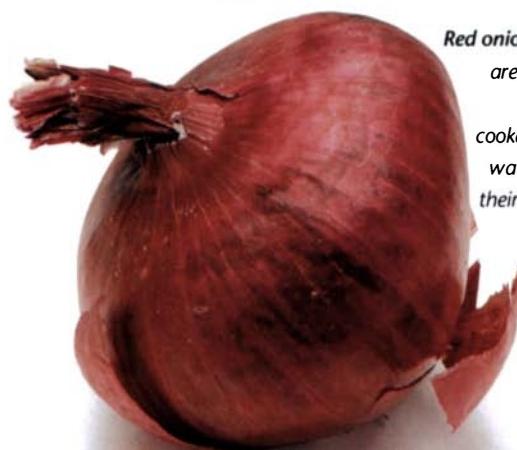
Spanish onions (storage), once imported from Spain, are now grown in the United States. These large, spherical onions have a sweet taste that's perfect for all types of cooking.



Yellow onions (storage) have a medium to strong flavor. Their pungency and shape vary with the time of year. Truly all-purpose, use them raw or cooked. Their flavor stays intact even when cooked for hours.



White onions (storage), with their sharp flavor and strong bite, are typically the most pungent onions in the market. Because they contain more water than yellow onions, they have a shorter shelf life. They're available year-round.



Red onions (storage) are at their best raw. When cooked, they turn watery and lose their magnificent color.

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Making quick vegetable stock



Reconstitute Veggie-Glace Gold for a shortcut to rich and flavorful soups and sauces.

The makers of the divine veal demi-glace, Demi-Glace Gold, have introduced a 100% vegetarian version for those of us looking for a good vegetable stock with true, full flavors. Veggie-Glace Gold is a heavy concentration of wine, onions, celery, carrots, garlic, tomato paste, and modified food starches. The concentrated Veggie-Glace has a pungent, oniony, slightly artificial smell, but this dissipates when it's reconstituted and blended with other flavors.

Diluted Veggie-Glace Gold makes a great base not only for hearty soups, but also for pasta sauces, vegetable *ragoûts*, or light sauces for sautéed shellfish or grilled fish. I tried it in two different dinners for my family: a wild-mushroom *ragoût* with fettuccine, and a sauté of chicken breasts with red wine, tomatoes, and capers. In both dishes, the addition of Veggie-Glace created a flavorful, but not overpowering, sauce.

To reconstitute the Veggie-Glace, whirl it with very hot water in a blender. I found this method to be much quicker than the recommended sim-

mering and whisking method.

Veggie-Glace Gold is sold in 1½- and 16-ounce containers (\$4.50 and \$22.50) in specialty food shops. For more information, call More Than Gourmet, 800/860-9385. *Abigail Johnson Dodge*, Fine Cooking's recipe tester, is a food stylist in Southport, Connecticut.

A flexible cutting board

I laughed when I first saw the Chop & Chop cutting board. No way would this thin plastic mat stand up to the serious task of chopping. But after dicing an onion, I stopped laughing (and not because the onion made me cry). Mat and onion both stayed in place as I chopped. My knife didn't cut through the plastic, as I had thought it might. And after dicing, I rolled the mat into a funnel and poured the onion pieces into my pan.

The Chop & Chop might not replace all my wooden boards, but its portability makes it perfect for picnics, campers, or boats. The FDA-



Easily transfer chopped vegetables to the pot by rolling the Chop & Chop board into a funnel.

approved mat doesn't stain or absorb odors, though it does score slightly to prevent knife edges from dulling. Chop & Chop comes in three sizes. The most popular (11½x15 inches) costs \$3.49. All are available at Lechter's Housewares, or from New Age Products in San Marcos, California (800/886-2467).

Judy Monroe is a cooking teacher and food writer in St. Paul, Minnesota.

Wine country cooking CD

If you're uneasy about the idea of a computer cookbook, check out *John Ash's Wine Country Cuisine*, a new multimedia CD-ROM based on the author's award-winning book, *From the Earth to the Table*. The CD features video clips of John Ash, culinary director at Fetzer Vineyards, chatting about subjects from wine pairings to making risotto.

Choose one of 270 recipes from the contents page, and then click on sound bites, wine suggestions, nutritional info, technique and ingredient advice, shopping lists, or one of the video clips—all related to the recipe.

Ash's fresh, seasonal recipes include something for everyone, and you can also modify the recipes or add your

own. Be aware that the software is a bit casual about spelling and punctuation, and occasionally omits cooking times and some nutritional info.

The CD costs \$30. Call Pinpoint Publishing, 707/523-0478, for more information. *Susie Middleton* is an associate editor for Fine Cooking.

Recipes on John Ash's CD-ROM feature video clips (click on "media") and technique sidebars (click on "info").

Finding food on the Web

Surfing the Web for interesting food and wine sites? A free newsletter will keep you posted on the tastiest ones. "The Food and Wine Online Newsletter," created by Gary Holleman, arrives via e-mail about once a month with addresses and brief descriptions of the latest food sites, including dining guides, shopping sources, and regional wine sites.

To receive this free newsletter, send an e-mail to majordomo@list.vnr.com, with the following message (ignore the subject line): subscribe vnr-cul. Back issues are available at www.vnr.com/cul.html.—S.M. ♦



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Baking Flaky Pastries with Phyllo Dough

Phyallo is a versatile dough. The paper-thin sheets can be rolled or folded into all kinds of whimsical shapes around sweet or savory fillings for appetizers, main courses, and desserts. Phyllo can also stand in for doughs that are

difficult to make, such as puff pastry and strudel dough.

What I especially like is that the resulting buttery, crisp, golden layers seem like they were hard to achieve. But with a few hints about handling—the most impor-

tant being not to let the dough dry out—using phyllo is easy.

Phyllo (pronounced FEE-loh and sometimes spelled *filo* or *fillo*) means “leaf” in Greek. The thin sheets are usually about 12 inches wide

creates moisture that may cause the sheets to dampen and stick together. After the phyllo has thawed in the refrigerator, letting it sit for an hour or so at room temperature makes the sheets even easier to unroll.



Versatile phyllo dough can be made into many shapes and will hold sweet or savory fillings. Shown here: a slice of rolled strudel, folded triangles, and a molded cup.

To get phyllo to perform at its best, thaw it slowly, keep it covered, and butter it quickly.

and 16 to 20 inches long. You'll find the sheets, rolled to fit into long, thin cardboard boxes, in your supermarket's frozen-food section near the pie crusts and puff pastry.

For the best texture, defrost phyllo slowly. Leave the dough sealed in the refrigerator for at least 12 hours before using it. Thawing phyllo at room temperature

COVER THE SHEETS TO KEEP THEM SUPPLE

Phyllo right out of its box is supple and easy to work with. But because the dough contains no eggs and is stretched so thin, it lacks flexibility and becomes brittle when exposed to air for even a few minutes.

To keep the sheets from drying and tearing, don't take them out of their package until the last possible moment. Have ready all your ingre-

How to handle phyllo to keep it supple



Keep phyllo dough covered so it won't dry out. Work with one sheet at a time; cover the rest with plastic and a moistened kitchen towel.



Brush the dough with melted butter to keep it supple. Begin by buttering the edges, which dry out faster, and then work toward the center.



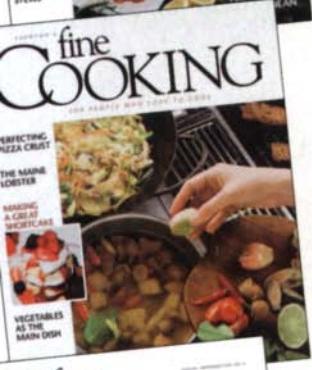
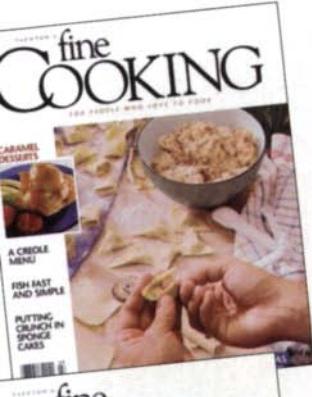
Cut the dough to size with a sharp knife or scissors. Buttering and layering the sheets before cutting is faster and keeps the phyllo more pliable.



Repair tears by pasting on a piece of phyllo from an extra sheet with melted butter. You'll never see the flaw once the pastry is baked.

Fine Cooking Back Issues!

Mint condition back issues cover everything from making stuffed pasta to shopping for kitchenware and more.



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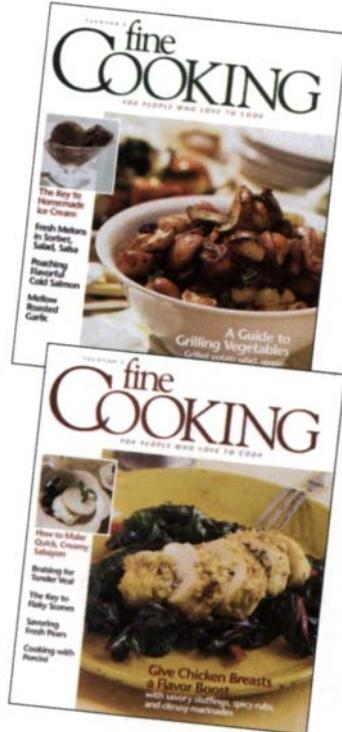
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Roll phyllo around a filling for strudel



Butter and stack eight sheets of phyllo. Sprinkle breadcrumbs or cake crumbs between each layer to keep them distinct and add crunch.



Spread the filling down the long side of the phyllo, 2 inches from the bottom. Fold the bottom edge over the filling.



Roll the strudel around the filling as you would a jelly roll.



Butter the top for a golden finish. Bake the strudel seam side down.

dients and equipment—your filling, melted butter, pastry brush, and baking pan—before you begin to assemble the dough. Then gently unroll the thawed sheets on a dry work surface, away from direct sunlight or any strong heat source.

Cover the stack with a sheet of plastic, topped with a clean, slightly damp towel. As you work, gently pull one sheet at a time from the stack, leaving the rest covered.

If your dough tears, don't panic. Perhaps the best advice in regard to cutting, folding, or rolling the dough is to stay calm. The dough may rip a little or stick together in spots, but if you keep it covered and then butter it quickly, it should do your bidding.

If a sheet does tear, remember that phyllo pastries, with their many layers, are especially forgiving of rips and tears. Simply cover the rip with a piece of phyllo from an extra sheet.

Occasionally, despite all your care, your phyllo dough will tear a lot. The problem is likely the dough and not you. The dough may have been allowed to defrost at the supermarket, which would cause

the sheets to stick together. Or the phyllo may be old and dry. There's no way to tell the condition of the dough from the box, so your best bet is to buy it from a store where it has a high turnover rate, such as a Mideastern market.

Because each package contains more sheets of phyllo than most recipes call for, you can usually salvage enough whole sheets from even a bad batch to make your dish. But if you're using the phyllo for a special dish, you may want to have an extra defrosted package of phyllo on hand, just in case.

BRUSH WITH BUTTER FOR CRISP PASTRY

Most phyllo recipes direct you to brush each sheet with melted butter or sometimes oil as you go. This thin layer of fat keeps the dough pliable as you work with it. When baked, the fat adds flavor to the bland dough, gives it a golden color, and crisps each layer, giving the pastry a delicate and flaky texture.

A light, even brushing is all that's needed; too much butter can saturate the dough and weaken it; too little will leave the finished pastry thick and heavy.

Fold triangles for "turnovers"



Butter and cut a 2-inch-wide strip. Spoon the filling near one end and fold the dough over it to make a triangle.



Continue folding flag-style until you reach the end. Butter the top of the pastry and bake with the last flap down.

Mold quick cups



Use a muffin tin to make easy phyllo cups. Stack and butter four sheets of phyllo. Cut out 5-inch squares and gently press the squares into the cups. Bake until golden.

Molly Stevens is a freelance food editor and writer living in Vermont. She is a contributing editor to Fine Cooking. ♦

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Lighting a Kitchen So It's Easy to Cook In and Looks Great

We all know bad kitchen lighting: a central ceiling fixture that grudgingly lights the floor below it and spills your shadow across any counter you stand at. There's usually a pale bulb behind a scalloped valance over the sink and a buzzing fluorescent stuck under a cabinet with a switch you have to grope for.

When we renovate, most of us want lots more light, but we tend to overcompensate with too much brilliance, making the room feel more like a handball court or a bus terminal at midnight.

Here's how to light a kitchen so it's easy to work in and fun to spend time in.

YOU NEED WORK LIGHT AND AMBIENT LIGHT

Light the kitchen much as you would the living room: bright splashes of light for tasks and gentle light to navigate the surroundings. Variation is pleasing and will serve you far better than laboratory glare.

First, ring the room with light. For counters, put fixtures under every wall cabinet, linked together and on wall switches. Use what are labeled "warm" fluorescent fixtures or shielded halogen lights in series. With the lights already in your range hood and oven, you've almost embraced the room, each counter lit and ready for you to work.

In the ceiling over the sink, pop in one or two recessed lights. They should be strong enough for you to see the dishes. Now that the perimeter of the kitchen is glowing, you can light up the center.

GET WORK AREAS WITH NO SHADOWS

With luck, you'll have a work island or peninsula where you'll be chopping, assembling ingredients, serving dishes. For direct shadowless downlight, use recessed fixtures, track lights, or hanging



A combination of bright working light and soft ambient light makes your kitchen an easy place to work and to relax.

lamps. Set these close enough together to cast overlapping light circles, which even out brightness and kill shadows. For example, in an 8-foot ceiling, center enough 100-watt bulbs spaced three to four feet

apart to light the surface evenly from end to end.

Lighting open space differs from lighting task areas only in degree. Use fewer fixtures and lower-watt bulbs so you can maneuver about, see into cabinets, and enjoy a restful contrast to workspace brilliance.

Another bulb or two may make sense at entries as well as something over the breakfast table, but resist a proliferation of fixtures above aisles and empty floor. If a light serves mainly to illuminate the top of your head, you don't need it.

USE DIFFERENT TYPES OF LIGHTS FOR DIFFERENT EFFECTS

Type of light	Advantages	Disadvantages	Comments
Incandescent	Warm, flattering, inexpensive.	Small bulbs too weak and hot for under-cabinet fixtures. Shortest lasting, least energy efficient.	Ideal for recessed lighting, pendants, and cabinet top uplights; easy to dim.
Halogen	Tiny fixtures; white, brilliant pinpoint light. Average longevity and energy efficiency.	Expensive bulbs generate considerable heat.	Can be dramatic; look before buying.
Fluorescent	"Warm" bulbs better than familiar "cold" tubes. Longest lasting; most energy efficient.	Dismal overhead.	"Warm" tubes best for under-cabinet lighting.

AFTER FUNCTION, CONSIDER AMBIANCE
Once you've set up enough lighting to find your way

around and to work by, think about ambiance.

Dimmers provide atmosphere, and they're inexpensive. Dimmer switches work best on incandescent lights, one per circuit. You'll have bright lights to work by, and you can dim them when you move to the table.

Uplights on cabinet tops bounce light softly off the ceiling. The simplest are Christmas-like strings of small bulbs that run across cabinet tops behind the crown molding. They're inexpensive, too.

PUT SWITCHES WHEREVER YOU LIKE

Light switches are relatively cheap to have installed, espe-

cially if you're rewiring. Set them in multiple locations. You'll want to be able to turn on overhead lights as you enter and flick them off as you leave without having to retrace your steps. Switches for under-cabinet lighting are handiest near the sink and cooktop.

MAKE THE MOST OF NATURAL LIGHT

Most kitchen windows are too small. Consider replacing them with bigger ones, even at the expense of wall storage.

A bay or plant window running all the way down to counter level looks great and lets in lots of light. Use crank-out casement windows because double-hung windows

are difficult to open from across the sink. Think about plain glass windows instead of mullioned ones, which block out close to 15% of natural light.

On an outside wall, consider clear glass for the 18-inch backsplash space between counter and wall cabinets. A long, narrow, fixed-pane window lets in light without eating into storage space.

Skylights, even small ones, are great wherever they'll fit. Flat glass skylights look better than domed plastic and won't cloud with age.

Rob Morris is a kitchen designer and cook. His design firm, Robert Morris Associates, is in Darien, Connecticut. ♦

THE BEST LIGHTING IN THE RIGHT PLACE

These installation tips will help you light your kitchen properly.

Under-cabinet fixtures—Best are "warm" fluorescents in closed casings. Least obtrusive (and most expensive) are Alkco "Little Inch" fixtures, which extend just 1 inch below the cabinet bottom (other units usually extend 1½ inches). Alkco bulbs range from 1 to 3½ feet in length, allowing long stretches of unbroken light along the backsplash. Series of incandescents or halogens are okay, but the former tend to be not quite bright enough and both generate considerable heat.

Recessed ceiling lights—

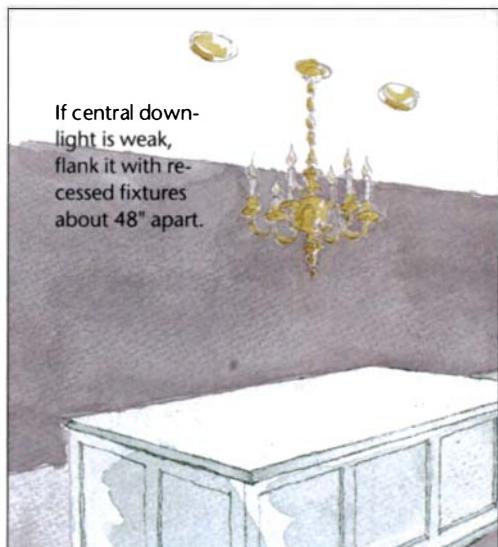
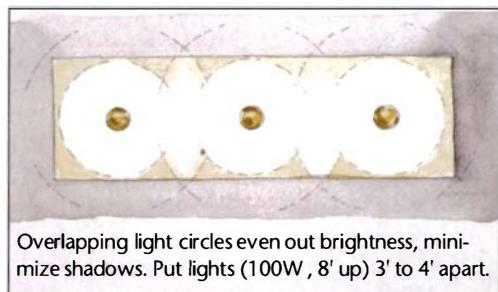
Incandescent floods are most common. Lightolier No. 1171 is a good, economical choice. White interiors disperse even light without glare and are less obtrusive than black.

Ceiling fluorescents—The usual "cold" variety spread a diffuse industrial kind of light that flattens neither kitchen nor cook. (Warm tubes, while good under cabinets, are too weak for use up high.)

Track lights—The canisters that attach to tracks are called "bullets." Six or so on an 8-foot track can be angled, grouped, and directed as you like. Newer incandescent bullets are trimmer, more attractive, and less commercial looking than they used to be. Halogen bullets are tiny, bright, and stylish. Check them out in a showroom to be sure the effect suits you.

Pendants—There are all kinds of pendants at hardware and lighting stores, in catalogs, and at home centers. A chandelier could make a refreshing change from your average ceiling fixture—take a chance.

Set up work lights that won't cast shadows

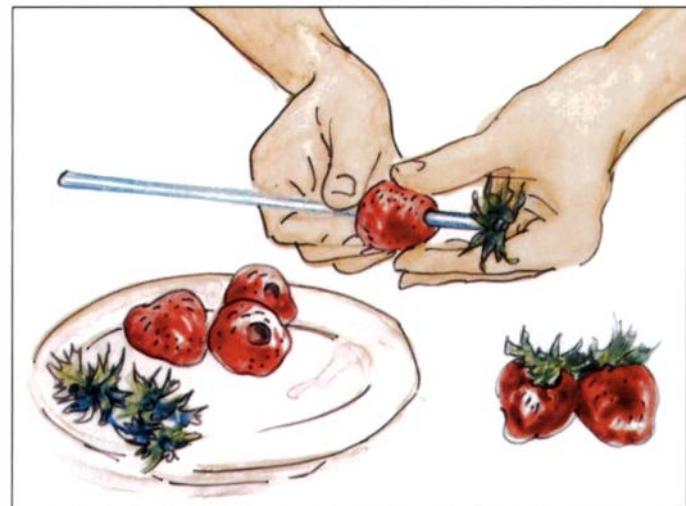


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A drinking straw hulls strawberries

Want to hull and core a strawberry? Push a plastic drinking straw through the berry, bottom to top. It really works.

—Philippa Farrar,
Santa Barbara, CA



To quickly hull strawberries, push a drinking straw through each berry from the bottom to the top.

—Marc Malone,
Waterford, CT

Holding whipped cream for 24 hours

To hold whipped cream overnight, select a bowl a little larger than the volume of your whipped cream. Thoroughly rinse and squeeze dry a triple layer of cheesecloth. Drape the cheesecloth inside the bowl and over the edges

and secure the cheesecloth to the bowl with a rubber band. Spoon your freshly whipped cream into the cheesecloth. Cover with plastic wrap and refrigerate for up to 24 hours before using. Some liquid will drain to the bottom of the bowl, and the whipped cream will remain firm and creamy.

—Phyllis Kirigin,
Croton-on-Hudson, NY



Use a plastic bag filled with water to evenly press down vegetables in a colander or sieve.

Plastic bag presses salted vegetables

In many recipes, vegetables with a high water content, such as cucumbers, eggplant, zucchini, and cabbage, often need to be salted, pressed, and left to drain to draw out excess moisture. A colander or strainer is the best tool for draining veggies, but its semi-spherical shape makes pressing difficult. I like to use a gallon-size plastic bag (zip-top or twist-tied) filled with water to weight the vegetables. The bag conforms to the irregular contours and puts consistent pressure on everything in the strainer.

—Russ Shumaker,
Richmond, VA

Water washes away tomatillo peels

Here's an easy way to deal with the sticky, papery husks of tomatillos. I peel tomatillos under warm water, and the husks come right off.

—Diana Tarasiewicz,
Grand Junction, CO

Clean appliance crevices with a toothbrush

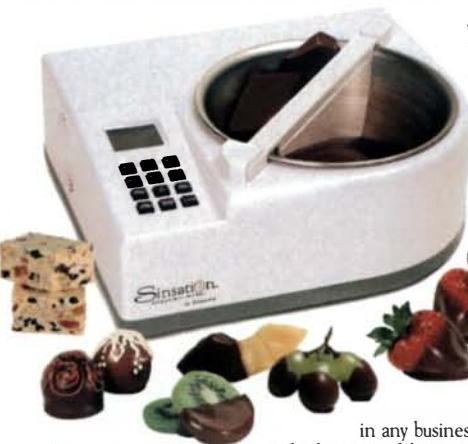
I like to keep an old toothbrush near the sink for cleaning the crevices of items like food processor attachments and the meat mallet. I store it along with my other scrubbers and sponges in a flowerpot with an attached saucer, so that the scrubbers can drain between uses.

—Stephanie Daval,
Princeton, NJ

Clarify butter in the microwave by "defrosting"

It's easy and quick to clarify butter in the microwave. Just use a microwave-proof dish or jug and use the "defrost" setting. The time needed will depend on the amount of but-

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Elaine González, Chocolate Artist, Educator, Lecturer

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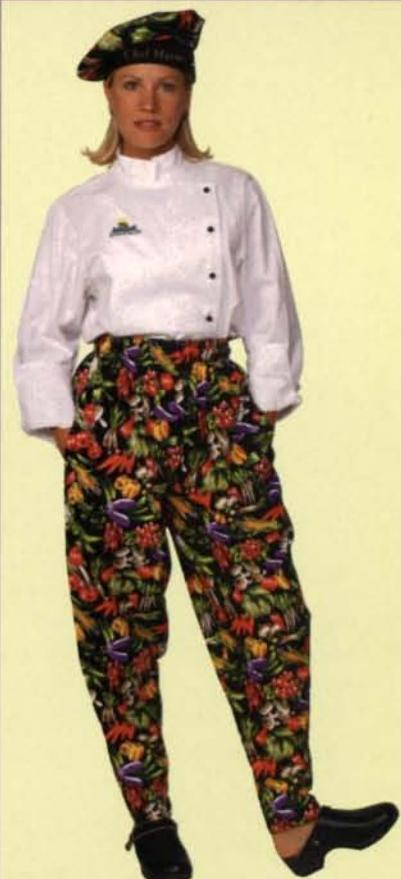


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Mix the ingredients for frozen desserts like granitas in a zip-top bag. Then, instead of stirring, take the bag out of the freezer and squeeze it a few times.

ter used. I've found that the "defrost" setting is also good for melting chocolate without scorching it.

—Wendy Chan,
Singapore

Grip jar lids with sandpaper

Get a good grasp on tough-to-open jar lids and bottle tops by covering them with a piece of sandpaper.

—Howard Wiener,
Spring Hill, FL



Make funnels for small-mouth jars from the tops of one-quart or half-gallon plastic soda bottles.

Make frozen desserts in zip-top bags

When I make granitas or ices, I put the juice and sugar mixture in a zip-top bag in the freezer. Then, instead of stirring it every once in a while, I just reach in the freezer, grab the bag, and squeeze it a few times. This breaks up the ice crystals and keeps me from dirtying up extra utensils.

—Kate Snider,
Dundas, Ontario

Soda-bottle funnels

I make funnels for filling small-mouth jars from the tops of one-quart or half-gallon plastic bottles.

—Jeanne F. Schimmel,
Hobe Sound, FL

A heating pad melts chocolate

You can melt chocolate evenly and safely and hold it at a constant temperature with a heating pad. Line a metal bowl with the heating pad and set a slightly smaller bowl on top. Put the chocolate in the smaller bowl and turn the pad to high. Stir the chocolate occasionally. To

speed melting, cover the top bowl. When the chocolate has melted, reduce the heating pad's temperature to low.

The chocolate will stay melted and it won't scorch.

—Kevin Ryan,
Montgomery, IL

Dust baking pans with breadcrumbs

Instead of dusting baking pans with flour, I use unseasoned breadcrumbs, a dusting of which is more pleasant than flour residue. It's a good way to use day-old bread.

—Rick Beaudin,
Bangor, ME

Cut a cake in small portions

At a dessert party, guests may wish to sample many tarts and cheesecakes, so they may only want a small serving of each. A good way to deal with this is a traditional Scandinavian technique for cutting rich tarts into small portions. Cut a cylinder from the center of the cake, using a pot lid or saucer as a guide. Cut the outside ring into wedges about 1½ inches wide. When the outside of the cake is

gone, you're left with a smaller round cake for tea time, another meal, or more small pieces.

—Lilia Dvarionas,
Kanata, Ontario

Checking for crab shells

There are few dining experiences as unpleasant as biting on a piece of crab shell in an otherwise elegant (and expensive) dish. After years of laboriously picking over crabmeat, I've developed a technique that's quick and accurate. It's all done by ear.

With an ear bent over a glass, china, or metal plate, pick up a clump of the crabmeat, two or three tablespoons in size, with your fingers. From a height of about six inches, drop it onto the plate. The crabmeat will scatter slightly, and if there is shell present, you will hear a distinct "click." If this happens, drop that clump again until you localize the guilty bit. Repeat until all the crabmeat has been checked. This method is quick and reliable.

—Helen D. Conwell,
Fairhope, AL ♦



To make small portions of a cake or tart, cut around a pot lid set in the center, and then slice the outer ring into wedges about 1½ inches wide.

Why does
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Consider
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FACT:

Natural extraction **without** heat, chemicals or additives gives Extra Virgin Olive Oil the **taste of purity**. No other olive oil, vegetable oil, margarine or even butter is processed so naturally.

FACT:

Extra Virgin Olive Oil is not just for salads. Its rich, full body is great for grilling, baking and sautéing – and it flavorfully replaces butter and margarine in virtually any recipe.

Try the delicious salad recipe below, featuring ATHENOS FETA CHEESE and CALIFORNIA WALNUTS.

SPINACH & FETA SALAD WITH TOASTED WALNUTS

Prep time: 25 minutes

6 cups torn spinach
2 oranges, peeled, sliced 1/4-inch thick (1 1/2 cups)
1 pkg. (4 oz.) Crumbled ATHENOS™ Feta Cheese
1/2 cup raspberries
1/2 cup thinly sliced red onion

1/2 cup chopped California walnuts
3 Tbsp. COLAVITA™ Extra Virgin Olive Oil
1/4 cup raspberry or strawberry vinegar
1 1/2 tsp. honey
Dash salt

HEAT oven to 350° F. Place walnuts in pan and bake 8-10 min. PLACE spinach, oranges, feta cheese, raspberries, onion and walnuts in large bowl; toss lightly. MIX oil, vinegar, honey and salt. Pour over salad and toss. Makes 6 side-salad servings.



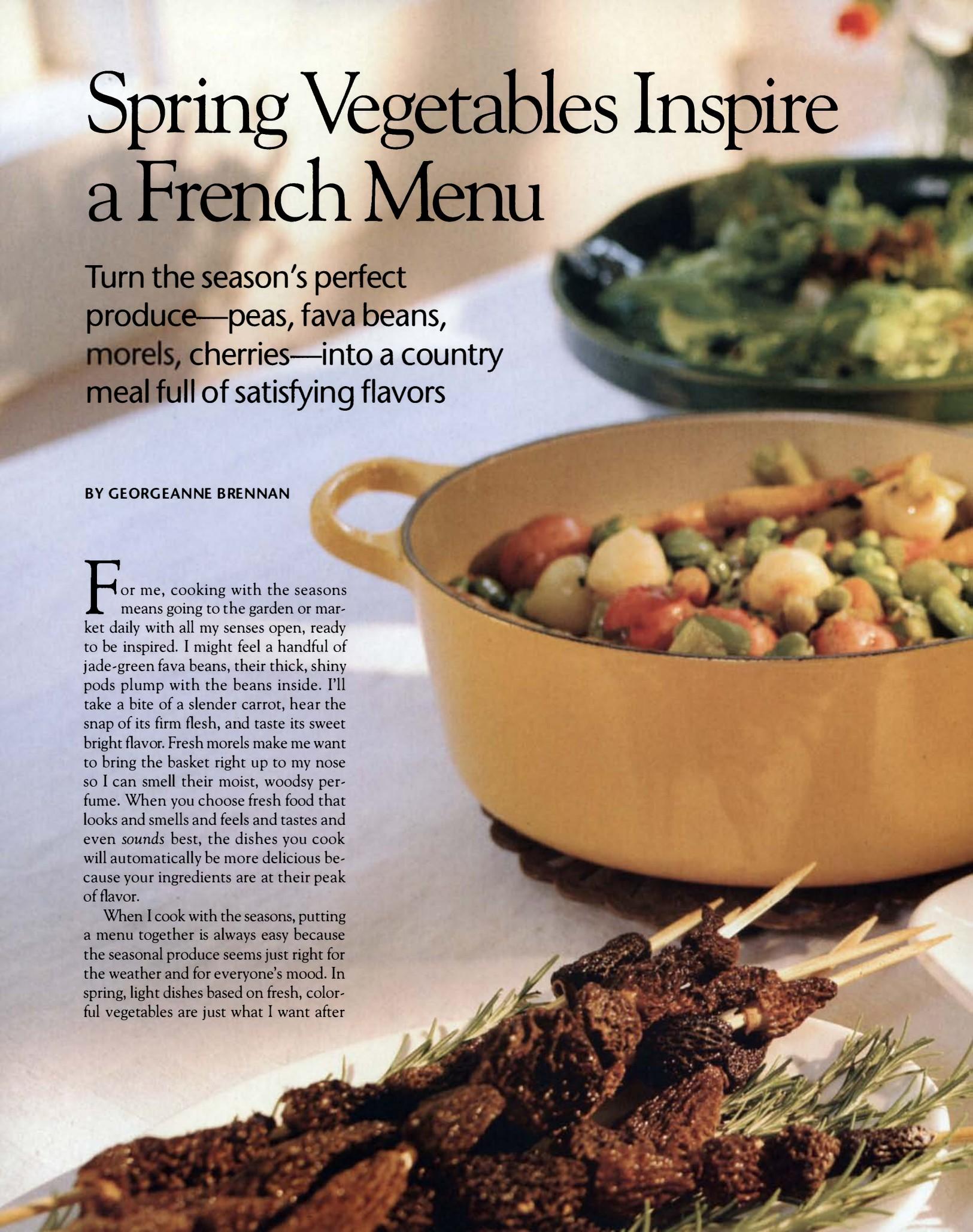
Spring Vegetables Inspire a French Menu

Turn the season's perfect produce—peas, fava beans, morels, cherries—into a country meal full of satisfying flavors

BY GEORGEANNE BRENNAN

For me, cooking with the seasons means going to the garden or market daily with all my senses open, ready to be inspired. I might feel a handful of jade-green fava beans, their thick, shiny pods plump with the beans inside. I'll take a bite of a slender carrot, hear the snap of its firm flesh, and taste its sweet bright flavor. Fresh morels make me want to bring the basket right up to my nose so I can smell their moist, woodsy perfume. When you choose fresh food that looks and smells and feels and tastes and even sounds best, the dishes you cook will automatically be more delicious because your ingredients are at their peak of flavor.

When I cook with the seasons, putting a menu together is always easy because the seasonal produce seems just right for the weather and for everyone's mood. In spring, light dishes based on fresh, colorful vegetables are just what I want after



MENU

Butter Lettuce,
Watercress & Parsley
with Lemon
Vinaigrette

◆
Spring Vegetable
Navarin

◆
Rosemary-Scented
Morels

◆
Galettes of
Spring Greens
with Goat Cheese
& Marjoram

◆
Fresh Cherry
Clafoutis

a chilly season of slow-simmered soups and hearty bean or meat stews.

This seasonal approach is the basis of French country cooking, and much of its appeal comes not from exotic ingredients or complicated techniques but from satisfying tastes and textures of ripe, full-flavored produce. Soups, salads, stews, grills, and fruit desserts can be humble fare, but they become stellar when prepared in season.

CRAFTING AN ALL-VEGETABLE MENU MEANS ATTENTION TO FLAVOR AND TEXTURE

In this menu, I've decided that the spring vegetables are so outstanding that I'm not going to feature any meat in the recipes. But preparing a menu without meat at the center of the plate to help define the role of the vegetables takes some special thought. A vegetarian meal is not just a collection of vegetable dishes minus the meat. You need to choose complementary tastes, textures, and colors that provoke and delight the senses, as any good meal should do.

A good range of flavors goes from light and bright to deep and earthy. One common problem with vegetable menus is that they can lack the earthier, more stick-to-your-ribs flavors for contrast with the bright, light, fresh notes you get from fruit and salads, for example. In this menu, I've tried to offer a full range of flavors and textures.

The first course is a simple salad, composed of pale green leaves of butter lettuce, dark green, peppery sprigs of watercress, and a generous handful of tasty flat-leaf parsley. Although we usually think of parsley as a seasoning ingredient, I think it's excellent treated as a vegetable. The salad is dressed with a lemon-shallot vinaigrette—very tangy to entice the taste buds for the main course, which is a spring vegetable navarin.

A navarin is a light stew, classically made with young spring vegetables and lamb. I've omitted the lamb in favor of more vegetables and lots of fresh herbs. I add a splash of white wine to give the sauce some complexity, and I use either vegetable broth or else chicken broth for a slightly fuller, more mellow flavor.

Galettes and goat cheese add substance to lighter fare. Accompanying

each serving of stew are several galettes, or thin pancakes, flavored with minced greens and scallions and lightly spread with soft goat cheese. While the galettes are delicate, they offer a richer, starchier counterpoint to the fresh flavors of the stew and salad. Another contrast comes from morels: wonderful, woodsy-tasting mushrooms that grow in the spring in many parts of the country. I thread the morels on skewers, lay them on a bed of rosemary, and broil them with just a little



SHELLING FAVA BEANS IS QUICKER WITH TWO PAIRS OF HANDS



Fresh favas come cushioned in a thick green pod, like fat pea pods. Just run your thumb along the seam to open the pod and pop out the beans.



Favas have an outer skin that can be tough (but totally edible). Blanch the beans, slit the translucent skin, and squeeze out the bright green bean.



Author Georgeanne Brennan and her daughter, Ethel, work together to quickly dispatch the fresh vegetables for the navarin.

butter, salt, and pepper. Very simple and very delicious, yet rich.

The dessert is a clafoutis (pronounced *clah-foo-TEE*), bursting with plump cherries. The fruit is set into a custardy mixture of eggs, milk, and flour, which is then baked until it puffs to glorious heights in the oven. As it cools, it collapses into a succulent, dense pudding to be served warm, sprinkled with confectioners' sugar.

Butter Lettuce, Watercress & Parsley with Lemon Vinaigrette

Butter lettuce means either Bibb or Boston, both of which have tender, soft leaves with a sweet flavor. Don't dress this salad until just before you serve it. *Serves six.*

9 Tbs. extra-virgin olive oil
3 Tbs. fresh lemon juice
1 tsp. salt
3/4 tsp. freshly ground black pepper
1 large shallot, coarsely chopped
1 1/2 cups coarsely chopped flat parsley leaves
1 large bunch watercress, stems removed
1 large or two small heads butter lettuce, small leaves left whole, larger ones torn into pieces

In the bottom of a salad bowl, combine the olive oil, lemon juice, salt, pepper, and shallot, mixing well with a whisk or a fork. Add the parsley, watercress, and butter lettuce and turn gently until everything is well coated with dressing. Serve immediately.

(More recipes follow)

AN EASY PREP SCHEDULE FOR SIMPLE, DELICIOUS FOOD

Most of the work in this menu is in preparing the vegetables, which can be relaxing, especially when you enlist family and friends.

In the morning

- ◆ Pit the cherries
- ◆ Trim the carrots, turnips, and leeks
- ◆ Shell the peas and fava beans
- ◆ Wash the lettuce

In the afternoon

- ◆ Make the clafoutis batter
- ◆ Make the galette batter
- ◆ Thread the morels on skewers

About an hour and a half before dinner

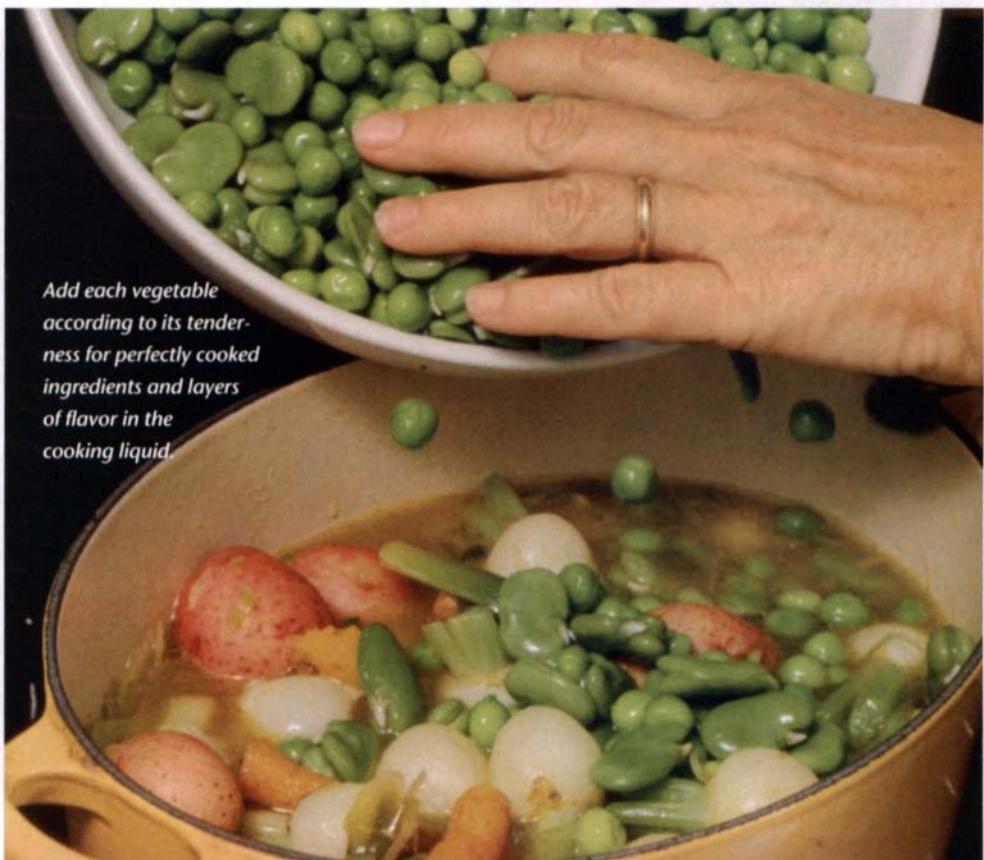
- ◆ Cook the navarin; keep warm
- ◆ Bake the clafoutis; keep warm

Just before dinner

- ◆ Make the galettes; keep warm
- ◆ Make the vinaigrette

During dinner

- ◆ Toss the salad
- ◆ Broil the morels while you dish up the navarin



Add each vegetable according to its tenderness for perfectly cooked ingredients and layers of flavor in the cooking liquid.

Spring Vegetable Navarin

Fava beans are worth seeking out, but if you can't find them, just up the quantity of the other vegetables. If you can't find very small vegetables, use larger ones but cut them into smaller pieces. *Serves six.*

**12 baby turnips, trimmed with about 1/2 inch green attached
1 1/2 lb. fava beans, shelled to yield 1 generous cup
1 1/2 lb. English peas, shelled to yield about 1 generous cup
8 slender leeks, slit and rinsed of all grit
4 Tbs. unsalted butter
1/2 cup chopped shallots
1 cup dry white wine
3 cups homemade or low-salt canned chicken or vegetable stock
18 small new red-skinned potatoes, unpeeled
1 tsp. salt
1 tsp. freshly ground black pepper
18 small young carrots, trimmed
4 Tbs. snipped fresh chives
2 Tbs. minced fresh tarragon
2 Tbs. minced fresh flat-leaf parsley**

Put the turnips in a steamer rack over boiling water, cover, and steam until they're tender enough to be pierced with the tip of a knife, about 10 min.

Unless the fava beans are very young and garden fresh, peel them because the skin can make them strong tasting, although many people prefer them this way. To peel, dip the beans in boiling water for 30 seconds, slit the skin with your thumbnail or

the tip of a knife, and slip off the skin. Steam the fava beans and peas together on a rack over boiling water until tender, about 6 min. (Alternatively, parboil them in water to cover until tender; drain.) Set the peas and fava beans aside.

Cut the whites and tender greens of the leeks into 2-inch lengths; you should have about 16 pieces. Cut enough of the remaining tender green tops into 1/2-inch-wide slices to measure about 1/2 cup. Set the leeks and greens aside.

Melt the butter in a large casserole or soup pot until foamy. Add the shallots and sauté until lightly caramelized, about 10 min. Pour in the white wine and, using a wooden spoon, scrape up any browned bits from the bottom of the pan. Add the stock, potatoes, salt, and pepper. Cover with a tight-fitting lid, reduce the heat to medium low, and simmer for about 8 min. Stir in the carrots and the leek greens, and then layer the leek slices on top. Cover and cook until the carrots and potatoes are tender when pierced with the tip of a sharp knife, another 8 to 10 min. Add the steamed turnips, peas, and fava beans, turning them gently into the simmering stew. Cook another 6 or 7 min. with the top removed. If you want a thicker stew, scoop out 1 or 2 potatoes, plus a little broth, purée them in a blender, and stir them back in. Taste for salt and pepper, and then stir in all but about 1 tsp. each of the green herbs. Serve the navarin hot in shallow soup bowls, sprinkled with the remaining herbs.

Rosemary-Scented Morels

Serve these woodsy mushrooms along with the navarin or as another savory topping for the galettes. If you can't find fresh morels in your area, you can use large dried morels; soak them in hot water for 20 minutes and then pat them dry. *Serves six.*

**Six 8-inch lengths of fresh rosemary
Approximately 30 medium to large fresh morels, gently brushed to remove any grit
Salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste
2 Tbs. unsalted butter**

Heat the broiler. Line a broiling pan with aluminum foil and lay the rosemary on top. Thread the mushrooms onto six skewers. (If using bamboo skewers, first soak them in water for 5 min.) Arrange the skewered mushrooms on the bed of rosemary, and then sprinkle the mushrooms with salt and pepper and dot with small pieces of the butter.

Broil about 2 min. on each side, just long enough to cook the morels through. Remove them from the broiler, discard the rosemary, and roll each skewer in the buttery juices. Serve immediately.



Cook a thin layer of batter first to help anchor the cherries in the clafoutis.

Galettes of Spring Greens with Goat Cheese & Marjoram

Serve these thin pancake-like rounds laced with greens and lightly topped with fresh goat cheese as an accompaniment to the stew, or offer them as a first course. They can be served flat or rolled. *Yields about 18 four-inch galettes.*

**1 1/2 cups flour
1 3/4 cups milk; more if needed
3 eggs
3/4 tsp. salt
1/2 tsp. freshly ground black pepper
1/2 cup minced young greens, such as spinach, chard, flat-leaf parsley, or dandelion
1/4 cup minced scallions
2 to 3 Tbs. butter
1/4 lb. fresh, soft goat cheese
4 Tbs. minced fresh marjoram, oregano, or thyme**

Whisk the flour, a little bit at a time, into the milk, until the mixture is smooth. Beat in the eggs, salt, pepper, greens, and scallions. The batter should be about the consistency of heavy cream; add a little more milk if necessary.

Heat about 1 tsp. of the butter in a skillet or griddle over medium high. When the butter is sizzling and the pan is hot, spoon the batter into 4-inch rounds, as many as your pan will hold. Cook one side until you see bubbles forming and the edges look done, about 1 min.; flip and cook the other side. Continue with the rest of the batter, adding butter to the pan as needed. Arrange the galettes on a plate and keep warm under foil as you cook the rest. Serve slightly warm or at room temperature with the goat cheese and marjoram on the side.

Fresh Cherry Clafoutis

The clafoutis puffs in the oven as it bakes, but it collapses almost immediately once removed. It may be served hot (my preference) or at room temperature. *Serves six to eight.*



Slightly buttery and spread with soft goat cheese, a pancake-like galette is a good contrast to the light freshness of the vegetable stew.



Spread the cherries in an even layer and pour on the rest of the custardy batter.

**1 cup milk
1/4 cup heavy cream
1/4 cup sugar
3 eggs
1 Tbs. vanilla extract
1/16 tsp. salt
2/3 cup all-purpose flour, sifted
4 cups pitted fresh cherries (use a sour cherry like Montmorency if possible, but Bing is delicious, too)
Confectioners' sugar for sprinkling**

Heat the oven to 350°F. Butter a shallow baking dish (such as a 10-inch quiche mold or pie plate). Combine the milk, cream, sugar, eggs, vanilla extract, salt, and flour in a mixing bowl and beat with an electric mixer on medium until frothy, about 5 min.

Pour enough of the batter into the prepared baking dish to make about a 1/4-inch layer; reserve the rest. Bake the thin layer just until it forms a skin, about 5 min. Remove the dish and arrange the cherries in a single layer over the surface. Pour over them the remaining batter. Return the clafoutis to the oven and bake until it's puffed and brown and a knife inserted in the center comes out



Sprinkle confectioners' sugar on the clafoutis as a simple decoration—anything more elaborate would be out of place on this slightly homely but delicious dessert. The cherries are pitted, but watch out for strays.

clean, about 35 min. Let cool slightly or to room temperature, as you like, and sprinkle with confectioners' sugar before serving.

Georgianne Brennan divides her time between her small farm in northern California and her house in Provence. She

has written many cookbooks, including *Potager: Fresh Cooking in the French Style* and *The Vegetarian Table: France* (Chronicle, 1992 and 1995). Her new book, *Apéritif: Recipes for Simple Pleasures in the French Style*, has just been published by Chronicle. ♦



Wine Choices

Sauvignon Blanc lets the flavors of spring vegetables shine through

The delicate, tender bounty of the early spring garden calls for fresh, light wines that will highlight the subtle flavors of the new harvest. With the exception of the morel dish (wild mushrooms clamor for full reds), all these recipes will do best with white wines.

But save your big, oaky Chardonnays. Sauvignon Blanc

(also called Fumé Blanc) has pleasantly high acidity that brings out the taste of food. It pairs nicely with the young vegetables featured here, highlighting the herb flavors in all the recipes. And the natural tartness of goat cheese in the galettes makes an especially fine match for Sauvignon Blanc. Many white Bordeaux (made

from Sauvignon Blanc and Sémillon grapes) would work well; Sancerre and Pouilly-Fumé, too (both 100% Sauvignon Blanc), provided they're not super-fruity. From this side of the Atlantic, you'll find delicious bargains from Hogue and Columbia Crest in Washington, and from Beringer and Buena Vista of California.

Or try something novel, like one of the lesser-known varietals. Light, flowery Folle Blanche from Louis Martini has a slight sweetness that matches the spring vegetables. A crisp, clean Oregon Pinot Gris from Adelsheim, Elk Cove, or Eyrle would work, too. *Rosina Tinari Wilson teaches and writes about wine and food in the San Francisco Bay area.*

Cooking Tender, Flavorful

A quick broil or sauté makes rib and loin chops juicy; a slow, gentle braise makes shoulder chops fork-tender

BY JOSH EISEN

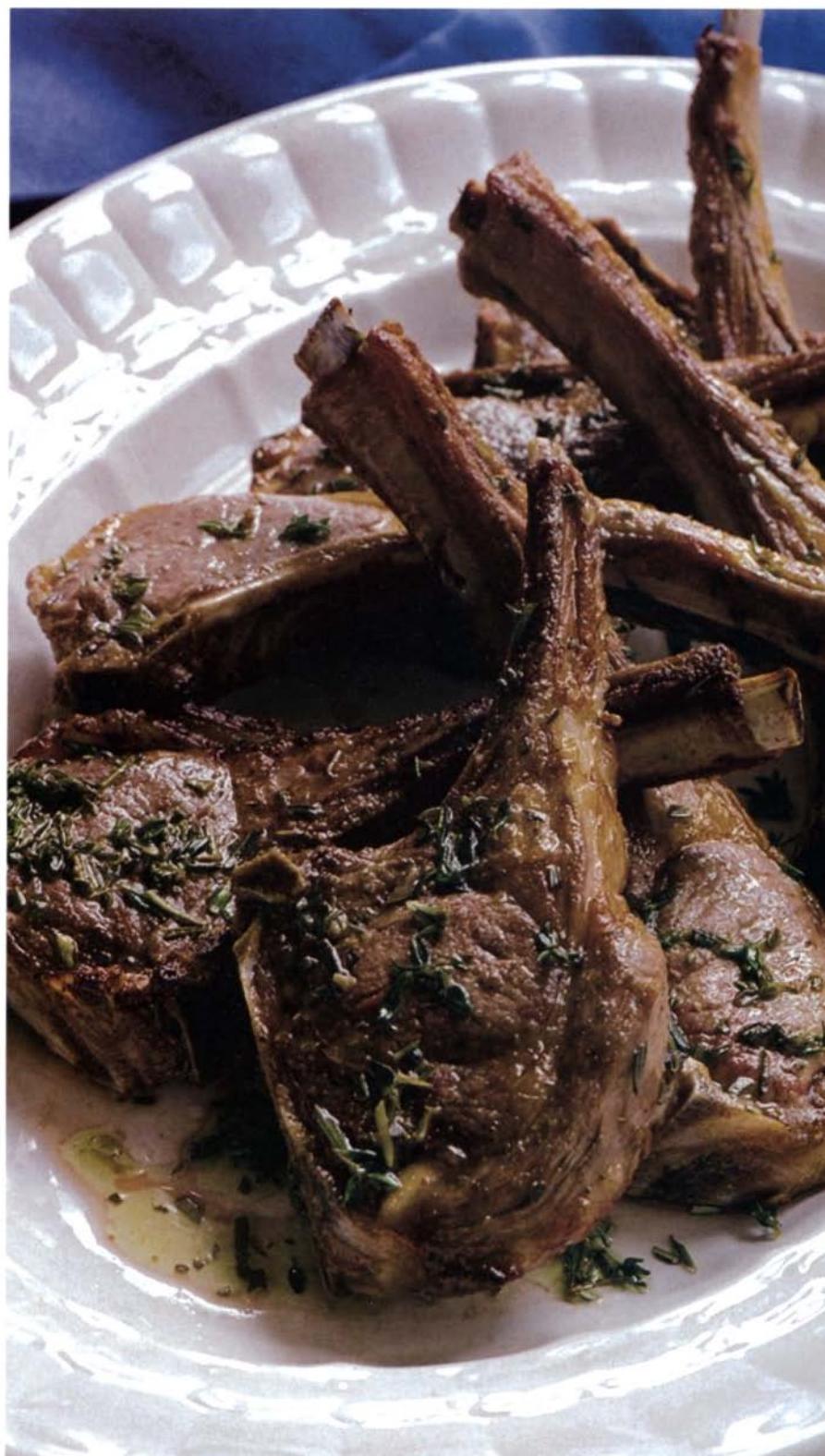
While there are many great main dishes that you can cook in a hurry, few are as versatile, as easy to prepare, and as satisfying as lamb chops. Whether I have friends coming over or I'm just spending a quiet evening with my wife, I find broiled herb-marinated rib chops to be the perfect dish: they take very little planning, they look beautiful on a platter, and they taste great. Other times, when I'm craving warm and spicy eastern flavors, I like to put a coating of freshly ground spices on loin lamb chops and serve them with a simple yogurt-based sauce. I happened to have made these the night my wife went into labor, unfortunately. She still can't eat them, but my friends and I love them.

Although rib and loin chops are great for just the two of us or for a small party, I like to braise shoulder chops for a crowd, so that I'm not busy at the stove when everyone else is having fun. Shoulder chops are inexpensive, and most of the work can be done ahead of time. Braising makes shoulder chops meltingly tender and produces a rich, flavorful sauce.

Shoulder, loin, and rib chops are all tasty, with just enough fat to be flavorful. Their small size makes them ideal for portioning, and they each pair well with just about any red wine. To enjoy lamb chops, all you need is a basic understanding of the different cuts so you can choose the cooking method that will bring out the best in each chop.

LOOK FOR LAMB WITH NICE MARBLING AND PINK MEAT

Naturally, before you cook lamb, you've got to shop for it. The best way to choose lamb is by its looks.



These tender rib chops need just a flash under the broiler to cook them to juicy perfection. An herb and lemon marinade adds a counterpoint to the rich flavor of the lamb.

Lamb Chops Three Ways



Lamb meat should be pinkish to pale red when cut, with a fine marbling of fat within the meat. The meat shouldn't be deep red like beef, nor should the exterior fat be brownish, greasy, or brittle. If you look around a bit, you'll notice there is variation from animal to animal; don't be shy about asking for what looks best.

You shouldn't worry too much about what country your lamb comes from. Most of the lamb in our markets is either from America or New Zealand. New Zealand lamb tends to be a little smaller than American. The smaller size doesn't mean the lamb will be more tender or flavorful, however. Lamb's flavor is affected by where it is raised, what it eats, how old it is at slaughter, and what type of sheep it is. But unless you're buying lamb directly from a farm (or from one of the sources listed on p. 38), it will be difficult for you to find most of this information. The younger the lamb, the sweeter the meat will be. New Zealand and the United States share similar laws that allow any sheep under twelve months of age to be called lamb.

RIB AND LOIN CHOPS LOVE HIGH HEAT; SHOULDERS SAVOR SLOW BRAISING

To bring out the herby, earthy flavor of lamb chops, cook them with care. Rib and loin chops respond best to high-heat cooking methods such as broiling and sautéing. Both of these methods develop the flavor by caramelizing the exterior.

For best results, bring your meat to room temperature before cooking. Pat the meat dry since a wet chop will steam rather than sear. Lightly rub it with oil before cooking, rather than putting the fat in the pan. You should also get your broiler or sauté pan really hot before you start cooking.

When broiling chops, find the best distance from the heating element. If you cook lamb chops too close to the heat, the outside will be well done before the inside has even warmed up. Yet if the meat is too far away from the heat source, the outside won't caramelize. Ideally, the chops should be two to four inches away from the element, so put the oven rack on its topmost level. Another way to boost the heat of a home broiler is to heat the broiling pan until it's really hot before adding the chops.

Sautéing is an excellent way to caramelize chops and seal in flavor. Choose a pan big enough to hold your chops without crowding them. If they're too crowded, the chops will steam rather than sear and brown. Make sure your pan is really hot before you start sautéing. You might want to sear your lamb chops until browned on both sides, and then finish the cooking in a very hot oven. After searing your chops, you can hold them at room temperature for 10 to 15 minutes if you wish, before finishing them in the hot oven.

Braising shoulder chops yields melt-in-your-mouth lamb. With more connective tissue, shoulder chops have to be cooked until well done or

The cut of lamb determines its tenderness

RIB CHOPS ARE DELICATE AND TENDER

Rib chops, with their pearly white "handles," are cut from the ribs just behind the shoulders along the spine. Each rack of ribs, on either side of the spine, will contain seven or eight ribs. Lamb ribs cost about \$8.99 per pound as whole racks and as individual chops. Many cooks like their rib chops frenched (the handle is scraped of all meat, fat, and connective tissue), but I prefer to leave most of that on for flavor.



LOIN CHOPS ARE COMPACT AND MEATY

Directly behind the ribs, running down the spine towards the animal's hindquarters, are the lamb loins. The lamb loins removed with their bones make a saddle; boneless lamb loins make delicate roasts. But most frequently you will see lamb loins cut into thick chops and sold for about \$8.99 per pound.



SHOULDER CHOPS ARE BONY BUT TASTY

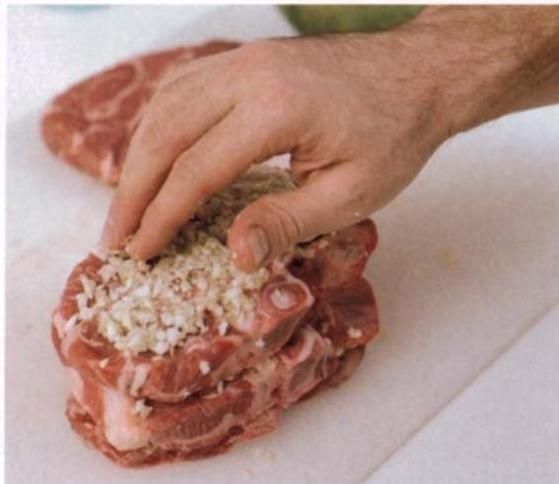
The least known—and least expensive (about \$4.29 per pound)—lamb chops come from the shoulder. Your grocer will probably have shoulder blade chops, cut from the rib side of the shoulder, and shoulder arm chops, that come from the shank side of the shoulder. These chops have several bones running through them, but their meat is very tasty and an excellent value.



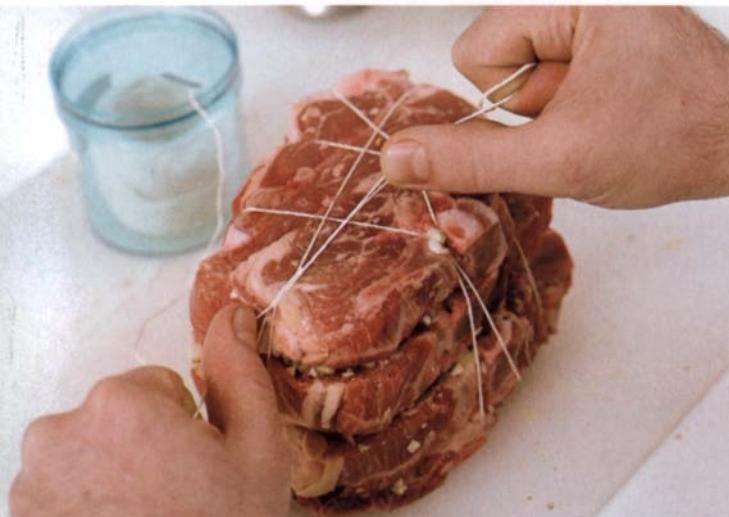
they'll be tough. It is possible to grill or sauté them if they've been marinated for a long time, but ideally, they should be cooked like a pot roast. Stacking several shoulder chops together and tying them into a bundle makes an easy roast to brown in a Dutch oven and then simmer in liquid. The long, slow cooking produces meat that practically falls off the bone.

PROPER TIMING YIELDS DELICIOUS LAMB CHOPS

While an hour and a half or two hours of braising will tenderize shoulder chops, a few too many minutes of broiling can toughen a beautiful rib or loin chop. How quickly a chop will cook depends on its thickness, its temperature when it is put on the fire, and the heat of the fire. As a result, it's best to check the chops after the minimum suggested time in your recipe. I have a method that I think works



Spread a lot of garlic between each shoulder chop. The garlic will mellow and flavor the meat as it braises.



Tie the stacked shoulder chops together securely. This will make a tidy bundle that you can easily turn with tongs as you brown the meat.

well for chops: Cook the chop for the approximate time in the recipe. Then stick a fine metal skewer or a slender, sharp knife into the center of the eye of the meat for about ten seconds. Pull it out and touch the end of it to the outer edge of your bottom lip. If the metal is warm to your lip, the lamb is cooked medium rare (rosy at the center); this is the way I like chops. If it's cool, the chops need some more time; if it's hot, they're well done—which seems a shame for lamb chops.



Josh Eisen thoroughly browns the bundle of shoulder chops to caramelize the exterior of the meat. This adds flavor to the rich braising liquid, which becomes the sauce for the final dish.

Herb- & Wine-Braised Lamb Shoulder Chops

Long, slow cooking tenderizes the shoulder. The meat will be rich and succulent and will practically fall off the bone. This can be a base for a *ragù* to serve with pasta, and it makes excellent leftovers. *Serves four.*

- 4 lamb shoulder chops (about 2 lb. total)
- 15 cloves of garlic (about 1 head), chopped
- Freshly ground black pepper
- 1 tsp. kosher salt
- 2 Tbs. olive oil
- 4 oz. pancetta (2 thick slices), diced (or 2 oz. diced bacon plus 2 Tbs. butter)
- 2 medium onions, chopped
- 2 carrots, cubed
- 1/8 oz. dried porcini, reconstituted in 1/2 cup hot water (liquid reserved and strained of grit), chopped
- One 17-oz. can Italian tomatoes, with juice
- Pared zest of 1 orange
- 2 bay leaves
- 6 large sprigs fresh thyme
- 6 large sprigs flat-leaf parsley
- 10 fresh celery leaves
- 2 cups dry white wine (the less oaky the better)

Heat the oven to 350°F. Lay one chop on a cutting board and spread a third of the garlic on it. Season with a grind of black pepper and a pinch of the salt. Lay another chop on top, so that the bones in the chops are aligned, and season with more garlic, pepper, and salt. Repeat with the last two chops, making sure that all the garlic is packed *inside* the roast. Securely tie the chops together in a bundle with kitchen twine.

Choose a casserole or Dutch oven with a tight-fitting lid that's just large enough to hold all the ingredients and heat it over medium heat. Add the olive oil. When hot, add the bundle of chops, brown it on all sides, and transfer it to a plate. Add the pancetta to the pan and cook until the fat renders and the pancetta browns, about 4 min. Add the onions and carrots and cook until lightly browned, about 10 min.

Return the lamb to the pot and add the rest of the ingredients, including the reserved porcini liquid. If needed, add enough water to bring the liquid about halfway to two-thirds up the sides of the lamb bundle; don't let the liquid cover it. Bring to a simmer. Cover the pot, put it in the middle of the oven, and cook slowly for 2 hours. If the liquid becomes more active than a slow simmer, reduce the heat. The slow cooking of this dish makes the meat extremely tender and mellowes the garlic.

When the lamb is finished (the chops should still be in a neat bundle, but the meat can be easily pulled apart with a fork), remove it from the liquid and set it aside, loosely covered, in a warm place. Remove the bay leaves, orange zest, and herb stems. If desired, bring the sauce to a simmer and reduce to thicken. Remove the twine from the chops and serve with some sauce ladled on top, along with pasta or mashed potatoes.

Broiled Herb-Marinated Lamb Rib Chops

Be sure the broiler pan is very hot before you set the chops on it, and put the top oven rack as close to the heating element as possible. This recipe also works well on the grill or on the stove in a heavy skillet. *Serves four.*

- 1/3 cup extra-virgin olive oil
- 4 Tbs. fresh lemon juice



The herb- and wine-laced braising liquid does double duty. It tenderizes the shoulder chops as they cook and then becomes a complex sauce.

- 2 bay leaves, broken in half
- 2 Tbs. minced fresh thyme leaves
- 2 Tbs. minced fresh rosemary leaves
- 1 1/2 tsp. freshly ground black pepper, or to taste
- 2 to 2 1/2 lb. lamb rib chops (about 12 chops, 3/4 inch thick)
- 3/4 tsp. kosher salt

In a nonreactive bowl or a zip-top bag, mix together the oil, lemon juice, bay leaves, thyme, rosemary, and pepper. Rub this mixture into the lamb chops and put the chops into the bowl or bag with the marinade. Seal the container, refrigerate, and marinate for at least 1 hour or as long as overnight.

If possible, remove the chops from the refrigerator an hour before cooking to bring them to room temperature. (If you can't do this, add a couple of minutes to the cooking time.) Heat the broiler and broiler pan for at least 10 min. before cooking. Remove the chops from the marinade and scrape the herbs from the chops. Pat the chops dry and season them with the salt. Put the chops under the broiler and cook for about 5 min. on the first side; turn them and cook about 3 min. for a rosy center.

Spice-Crusted Lamb Loin Chops with Green Coriander Sauce

For this recipe, be sure to use whole spices and crush them yourself. Preground spices are too fine to form a crust, and they'll turn bitter during cooking. You can also use rib chops in this recipe. *Serves four.*

- 2 to 2 1/2 lb. loin chops (about 4 chops, 1 1/2 inches thick)
- 2 Tbs. oil

FOR THE SPICE RUB:

- 1 Tbs. coriander seeds
- 1 Tbs. cumin seeds
- 1 Tbs. fennel seeds
- 1 tsp. kosher salt
- 1/4 tsp. freshly ground white pepper

(Ingredient list continues)



Spice-crusted loin chops are both juicy and crunchy when properly sautéed:
Dry the chops, press on the spices, use high heat, and don't crowd the pan.

FOR THE SAUCE:
6 Tbs. plain yogurt (not low- or nonfat)
1/2 tsp. coriander seeds
2 cloves garlic, finely minced
Kosher salt and freshly ground white pepper
1 tsp. honey
3 Tbs. fresh lime juice
4 Tbs. extra-virgin olive oil
1 cup loosely packed fresh cilantro leaves, finely chopped

Make the spice rub—One hour before cooking, remove the chops from the refrigerator. Crush the coriander, cumin, and fennel seeds in a mortar and pestle or by pulsing in a coffee grinder or food processor. Combine with the salt and pepper. The mixture should have a sandy texture; don't turn it into a powder.

Make the sauce—Put the yogurt in a very fine strainer or a coffee filter and suspend it over a bowl. Let it stand

for 20 min. Crush the coriander seeds and combine them with the garlic, pepper, honey, and lime juice. Beat in the olive oil and then mix in the yogurt until just incorporated. Fold in the cilantro. Season with salt and pepper. This sauce can be prepared up to a day in advance and stored, tightly covered, in the refrigerator.

Cook the chops—A few minutes before cooking the chops, unwrap them and pat them dry. Press the spices onto the chops, coating the surface thoroughly; this will become the crust. Heat a heavy skillet over medium heat until very hot. Add the oil, immediately followed by the chops. If the pan is not large enough to hold all the chops, cook them in batches. If you crowd them in the pan, the crust won't form as well. Cook the chops about 9 min. per side per inch of meat for medium rare (or about 13 min. per side in this case). Transfer to a warm platter and serve with the sauce.

SPECIALTY LAMB

If you're looking for baby lamb or naturally farm-raised lamb, try the sources below. If you live in an urban area, try Greek, Spanish, or Middle Eastern groceries for whole baby lamb or other cuts. Or visit your local greenmarket, where you may be able to meet farmers from your area. These farmers, like the sources below, will be able to tell you exactly what the lambs have been eating, or other details that ultimately affect the flavor and texture of the lamb.

LAMB SOURCES

D'Artagnan, 399-419 St. Paul Ave., Jersey City, NJ 07306; 800/DARTAGN. New Zealand and Australian lamb.

Jamison Farm, 171 Jamison Lane, Latrobe, PA 15650-9400; 800/237-5262. Spring lamb, baby lamb, young milk-fed lamb, chops, legs, racks, and shanks.

Summerfield Farm, 10044 James Monroe Hwy., Culpeper, VA 22701; 703/547-9600. Naturally raised young lamb.

Whippoorwill Farm, PO Box 717, Lakeville, CT 06039; 203/435-9657. Organic lamb.

Josh Eisen lives with his wife and son in New York City, where he teaches and writes about wine and food. ♦

Wine Choices

Merlot's smooth tannins won't overpower the sweet subtleties of lamb



Lamb with Bordeaux is traditional, and for good reason: the meat's full flavor and texture needs a wine with enough tannin to balance the fat. But Cabernet Sauvignon, the chief grape of most Bordeaux wines, might be a bit much for chops (compared, say, to a leg or shoulder roast). So choose a St. Emilion—it's higher in

Merlot, smoother, and lets the meat's subtle flavors come through more readily. Château Simard and Château Puy-Blanquet are delicious and affordable.

Happily, Merlot's booming popularity has brought a surge of good values from areas as diverse as southern France (try Réserve St. Martin, Les Jamelles, or Fortant de

France), Chile (look to Carmen for fruitier flavors and Carta Vieja for dark, earthy ones), and Long Island (Pelligrini and Gristina are consistently fine).

Lamb also pairs famously well with Rhône reds, and the deep, pungent, spice-and-tar flavors of Châteauneuf-du-Pape will tie in especially well with the spice-

crusted chops. Nicely balanced Rhône-style reds at a lower price include Ensemble by California's Beaulieu Vineyard and d'Arry's Original, a Shiraz-Grenache combo from d'Arenberg of Australia.

Rosina Tinari Wilson teaches and writes about wine and food in the San Francisco Bay area.

Sauté and Simmer Grains for Delicious Pilafs

Try wild rice, barley, or millet for full-flavored and delicately chewy dishes



Wild rice tastes great with nuts and dried fruits, which complement its deep, earthy flavor.

BY AMANDA CUSHMAN

Sauté your favorite grain with a little onion in oil or butter, add stock, simmer, and then toss in ingredients for texture and flavor, and you've made a pilaf. For starters, you have an appealing, colorful side dish. Add meat, beans, or vegetables, and you'll elevate your pilaf to main-dish status.

The pilaf technique translates well to many grains; though rice is the traditional base, pilaf is adaptable. Barley cooks up plump and sturdy with a pleasantly chewy texture and nutty flavor; coarse-textured millet turns delicate when cooked; it also has a nutty flavor.

Whatever grain you choose, your pilaf will be deliciously easy. When you get home from work, you can quickly chop up some ingredients, put the pan on to simmer, and by the time you've changed clothes and read the mail, dinner's ready.

FIRST STEPS GIVE GRAINS FLAVOR AND TEXTURE

Here are the extra steps that set pilafs apart from plain boiled or steamed grains.

- ◆ **Dry-toast barley and millet to bring out their nutty flavor.** Skillet-toasting also keeps delicate grains like millet from turning mushy during cooking.
- ◆ **Next, sauté onions or shallots in butter or oil.** Sautéing these to a deep, golden color adds flavor.

◆ **Add the grain.** Stir it well to make sure it's coated with oil. A light coating on each grain helps keep the grains from sticking to one another, so you won't end up with a gummy pilaf. And that bit of fat goes a long way toward adding flavor.

FULLY COOKED GRAINS ARE CHEWY BUT NEVER CRUNCHY

Grains taste best cooked in vegetable, chicken, or even veal stock. Fish stock or beef broth can be overpowering. I cook grains in plain water only when I want a very simple taste.

The idea is for all the liquid to be absorbed just at the time the grains are done. Keep the pan covered and check for doneness as you approach the end of the recipe's cooking time. If the liquid is all gone but the grain needs more time, add $\frac{1}{2}$ cup water, bring it back to a boil, reduce the heat, and continue cooking.

A little bit of bite is fine, but a crunch or a too-chewy texture means the grain is undercooked. If you're happy with the texture of your grain but there's still liquid in the pan, just pour it off.

GRAINS WELCOME MORE COLOR, TEXTURE, AND FLAVOR

Most grains are beige or brownish and need a lift of color. Chopped herbs, dried fruits, and diced vegetables break the brown monotony and add texture and flavor, too. White rice and bulgur tend to turn out fluffy rather than chewy; diced vegetables and nuts are especially good for adding crunch to those grains. I don't like tossing in extra oil or butter after cooking. This makes the pilaf too heavy because the grains will just keep absorbing oil, like pasta does.

TURN LEFTOVER PILAF INTO DINNER TOMORROW NIGHT

Make a few nights' worth of pilaf. You'll have delicious leftovers and a spring-board for easy meals.

◆ Make salads by adding vinaigrette to leftover pilaf. Mix in diced vegetables—raw or blanched—for additional color and texture.

◆ Make your own version of that Chinese takeout staple, fried rice. Sauté leftover rice pilaf in a little oil and add scrambled egg and bean sprouts.

◆ Build a main dish. Add cooked chicken, shrimp, pork, or beef. Or bulk up a pilaf with beans: grains and beans make an extremely nutritious meal.

Steps to a superb pilaf



Sauté the onions to a caramelized golden color. This will give the pilaf deeper flavor.

Wild Rice Pilaf with Dried Apricots & Pine Nuts

Wild rice varies, so check for doneness after 45 minutes, but it may need more than an hour. Try dried cherries or cranberries instead of apricots, or brown rice instead of wild. Serves four.

*3 Tbs. butter
1 medium onion, diced
1 tsp. finely chopped fresh rosemary
1 cup wild rice
2 cups homemade or low-salt canned chicken stock
 $\frac{3}{4}$ tsp. salt; more to taste
 $\frac{1}{3}$ cup diced dried apricots
 $\frac{1}{2}$ cup toasted pine nuts
Freshly ground black pepper to taste*

In a medium frying pan, heat the butter over medium heat and sauté the onion and rosemary until the onion



Barley & Wild Mushroom Pilaf is great by itself, and it makes a delicious, simple dinner when you top it with grilled chicken.



Add the grains and stir to coat them well. A light coating of oil keeps the grains from sticking together.



Add stock for simmering. Lighter stocks like chicken or veal are best for cooking pilafs.



The pilaf is done when the grain is tender but still chewy and the liquid is absorbed. Wild rice grains will start to burst open. If the grain is done but some liquid remains, just pour off the liquid.

is deep golden, about 10 min. Add the wild rice and stir to coat. Add the stock and salt. Cover, bring to a boil, and reduce the heat. Simmer over medium-low heat until the grains are slightly open and tender but not mushy, about 50 min. Let rest covered for 5 min. Stir in the apricots, pine nuts, and pepper; taste and adjust seasonings.

Barley & Wild Mushroom Pilaf

Toasting the barley first intensifies its nutty flavor. If you can't find good shiitakes, use crimini or button mushrooms. Serves four.

1 cup pearl barley
2 Tbs. olive oil
3 cloves garlic, minced
2 shallots, minced
1 red bell pepper, diced
1½ cups sliced shiitake mushrooms (stems removed)
¼ tsp. salt
Freshly ground black pepper to taste
1 tsp. chopped fresh thyme
2 cups homemade or low-salt canned vegetable or chicken stock
½ cup chopped flat-leaf parsley

In a medium frying pan, toast the barley over medium heat until fragrant and slightly browned, about 4 min. Transfer to a bowl and set aside. In the same pan, heat the oil and sauté the garlic and shallots over medium heat until fragrant, about 1 min. Add the red pepper and mushrooms; sauté, stirring, until the mushrooms are softened slightly, about 5 min. Add the salt, pepper, barley, and thyme; stir to coat. Add the stock and bring to a boil. Cover, reduce the heat to low, and cook until all the liquid is absorbed and the barley is slightly tender but still chewy, about 45 min. Let rest covered for 10 min. Stir in the parsley; taste and adjust seasonings.

Saffron-Scented Millet Pilaf with Roasted Peppers

The deeply flavored blend of roasted peppers and fragrant spices is worth the few extra steps in this one. Serves four.

1 cup millet
3 Tbs. olive oil
1 small onion, diced



½ tsp. salt
1 large pinch saffron, crumbled
¼ tsp. turmeric
2 cups homemade or low-salt canned chicken stock
3 Tbs. chopped basil
2 tsp. chopped thyme
2 red bell peppers, roasted, peeled, seeded, and chopped
Freshly ground black pepper to taste
Chopped flat-leaf parsley for garnish

In a medium frying pan, toast the millet over medium heat, stirring often, until it starts to pop, 3 to 4 min. Transfer to a bowl and set aside. In the same pan, heat the oil over medium heat; add the onion and salt. Sauté until the onion is golden brown, about 10 min. Add the saffron and turmeric; cook for a few seconds. Add the millet and stir to coat, about 1 min. Add the stock, bring to a boil, reduce the heat to low, and cover. Cook until the liquid is absorbed, about 20 min. The millet should keep its texture but shouldn't be crunchy. Toss in the basil, thyme, and roasted peppers. Add pepper to taste and sprinkle with parsley.

**Saffron-Scented
Millet Pilaf with
Roasted Peppers**
is a colorful and intense mix of flavors.

Amanda Cushman is a chef, cooking teacher, and food writer who lives in New York City. ♦

I started cooking as soon as I was tall enough to see over the top of the grill at my parents' restaurant—Dorothy's—in Greenwich, Connecticut. Known for our homey food, we made the best meatloaf, the best lobster club, and the best macaroni and cheese in the state. Every customer had a favorite. So did I. I loved our hamburgers: perfect patties of fresh, not-too-lean beef, garnished with melted American cheese, crisp lettuce, ripe red tomatoes, and served on a toasted bun. Once I start thinking about them, nothing else will do. Fortunately, I can always make these juicy burgers at home. By following the five steps described here, you can, too.

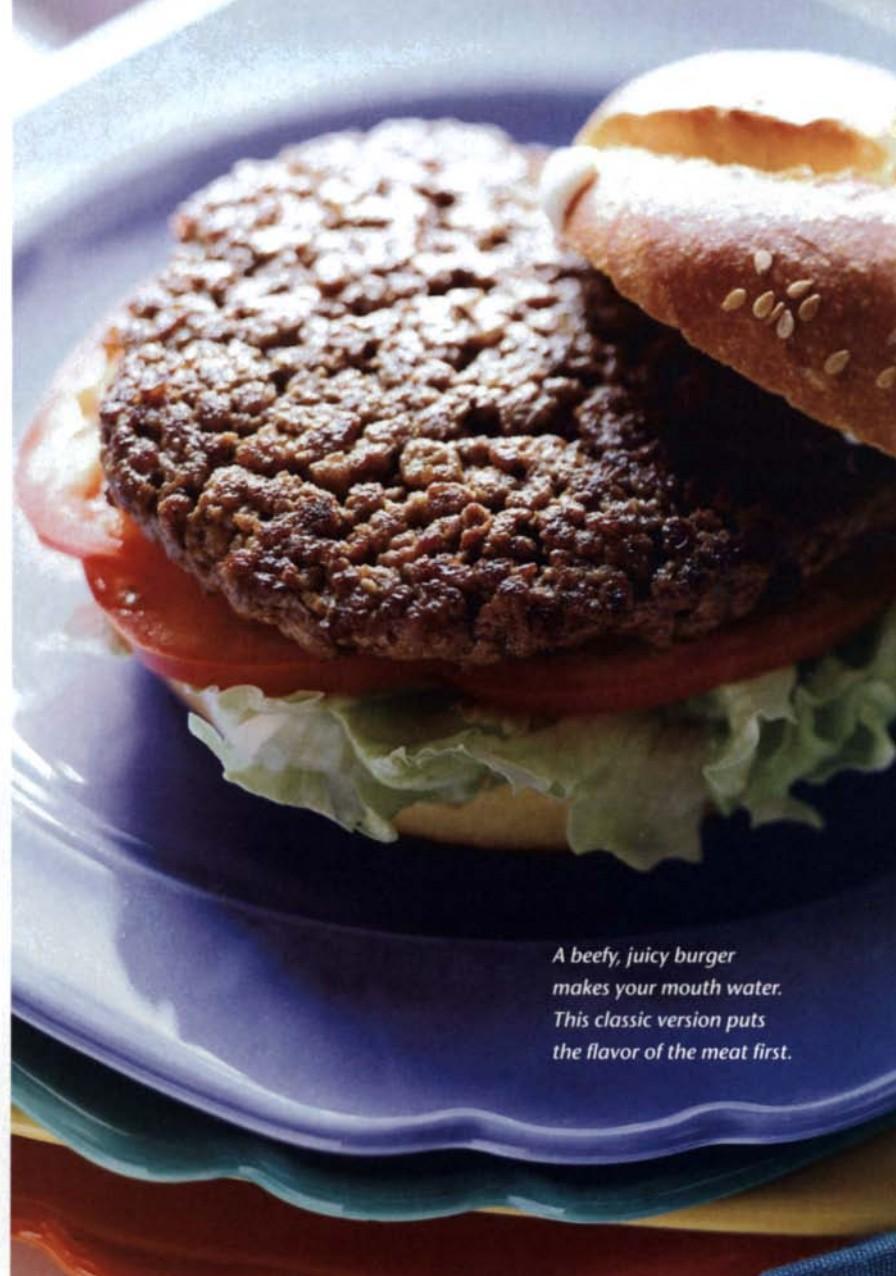
◆ **Begin with great beef that's freshly ground.**

A blend of sirloin and chuck works best; sirloin gives the burger a tender texture, while the fat content of the chuck adds flavor. Buy the best meat you can find and don't skimp on the fat; you want at least 12% to 15% fat for a beefy-tasting burger.

Grind the meat as close to cooking time as possible. If you have a grinder or a grinding attachment for your stand mixer, you can easily do this yourself. Grind the meat to a medium-coarse texture; you'll see that the pieces of fat measure about $\frac{1}{4}$ inch around. If you don't have a grinder, many butchers, including those in big supermarkets, will freshly grind cuts of chuck and sirloin for you. I don't recommend using a food processor: I've found that it tears the meat and doesn't mix the fat and the lean well.

◆ **Keep seasonings to a minimum.** I don't add herbs, onions, cream, breadcrumbs, or other fillings to my burgers because I like the flavor of the pure beef. I do add a little bit of salt and pepper to help bring out the beef's flavor.

◆ **Make a small patty.** We used to serve a jumbo 10-ounce burger at Dorothy's, and it tasted totally



A beefy, juicy burger makes your mouth water. This classic version puts the flavor of the meat first.

Five Tips For a Perfectly Juicy, Beefy Burger

A chef shares his secrets for cooking the quintessential burger, the signature dish at his parents' diner

BY PHIL COSTAS



different—more like a steak that had been chopped up and put back together. Five ounces is the perfect size for a hamburger because it will stay juicy throughout as it cooks; bigger burgers need longer cooking time, which can make the outside dry before the inside is cooked. The smaller size also means you can get some of the burger, the bun, and any toppings into your mouth in each bite.

After weighing the raw meat, I shape it into a patty by lightly passing it back and forth between my cupped hands until it's about $\frac{3}{4}$ inch thick and about $3\frac{1}{2}$ inches in diameter. Don't be afraid to give it a final pat to make sure it's evenly thick; although overhandling meat can make it pasty, you shouldn't have to handle it for long to make a patty.

Let the patties sit at room temperature for about 5 minutes before cooking so that they feel just cool to the touch. If the ground meat is too cold, the outside might overcook before the inside is done.

◆ **Cook the burgers on a flat surface.** At Dorothy's, we cooked burgers on a well-seasoned flat-topped grill. A hot, flat surface cooks the burger evenly. An open grill can't provide even heat because of its spaces, which also allow valuable juice to escape. On an open grill, you could easily end up with a slightly dry, partially under- and overcooked burger instead of one that's uniformly cooked. And with a grill, the flavor of the gas, charcoal, or wood interferes with the burger's pure beef flavor.

At home, I cook my burgers on a hot nonstick griddle. A seasoned cast-iron griddle or a similar, solidly constructed frying pan would also work. You're probably wondering where all the fat goes on a griddle. Well, it stays right there, which is part of the beauty. The burger cooks in its own fat, keeping the meat juicy. I'm not saying you should eat one of

these every night, but just try this method so when you do treat yourself to a burger, it's a great one.

◆ **Don't squeeze the burger.** People often smash their burgers with the spatula, not realizing that this forces out the juices. If you can resist squeezing, you'll be rewarded with a juicy burger. I prefer to cook my burgers to medium rare, but even a well-done burger will stay juicy if you don't squeeze the life out of it.

Dorothy's Classic Burger

For the true classic, garnish the burger with cheese (melted on the bun, not on the meat) and add lettuce, tomato, and mayonnaise. *Yields 4 burgers.*

*3/4 lb. beef sirloin
1/2 lb. beef chuck
3/4 tsp. salt
1/2 tsp. freshly ground black pepper*

Cut the meat into pieces roughly 2 inches square and then pass through a meat grinder (or a stand mixer with a grinding attachment) to a medium grind. The ground fat should be about $\frac{1}{4}$ inch around. If the pieces are much bigger than that, run the meat through again.

Season the ground meat with the salt and pepper. Divide the meat into 5-oz. portions. Using your hands, gently shape each portion into a patty about $\frac{3}{4}$ inch thick and about $3\frac{1}{2}$ inches in diameter.

Heat a nonstick griddle or frying pan or a cast-iron pan over high heat until very hot. Using a spatula, lay the burgers on the pan without crowding them. (If they're too close together, they'll steam.) Turn the heat to medium high and cook about three-quarters of the way through, about 4 min. for medium rare. Flip the burgers over and cook until the meat feels firm yet gives slightly in the center, about another 2 min.

Phil Costas is chef/owner of Kathleen's in Stamford, Connecticut, which is named for his mother, Kathleen Dorothy Costas. ♦



For the best flavor, grind the beef close to cooking time. For the best texture, the pieces of fat should be about $\frac{1}{4}$ inch around. If they're much bigger, run the meat through again.



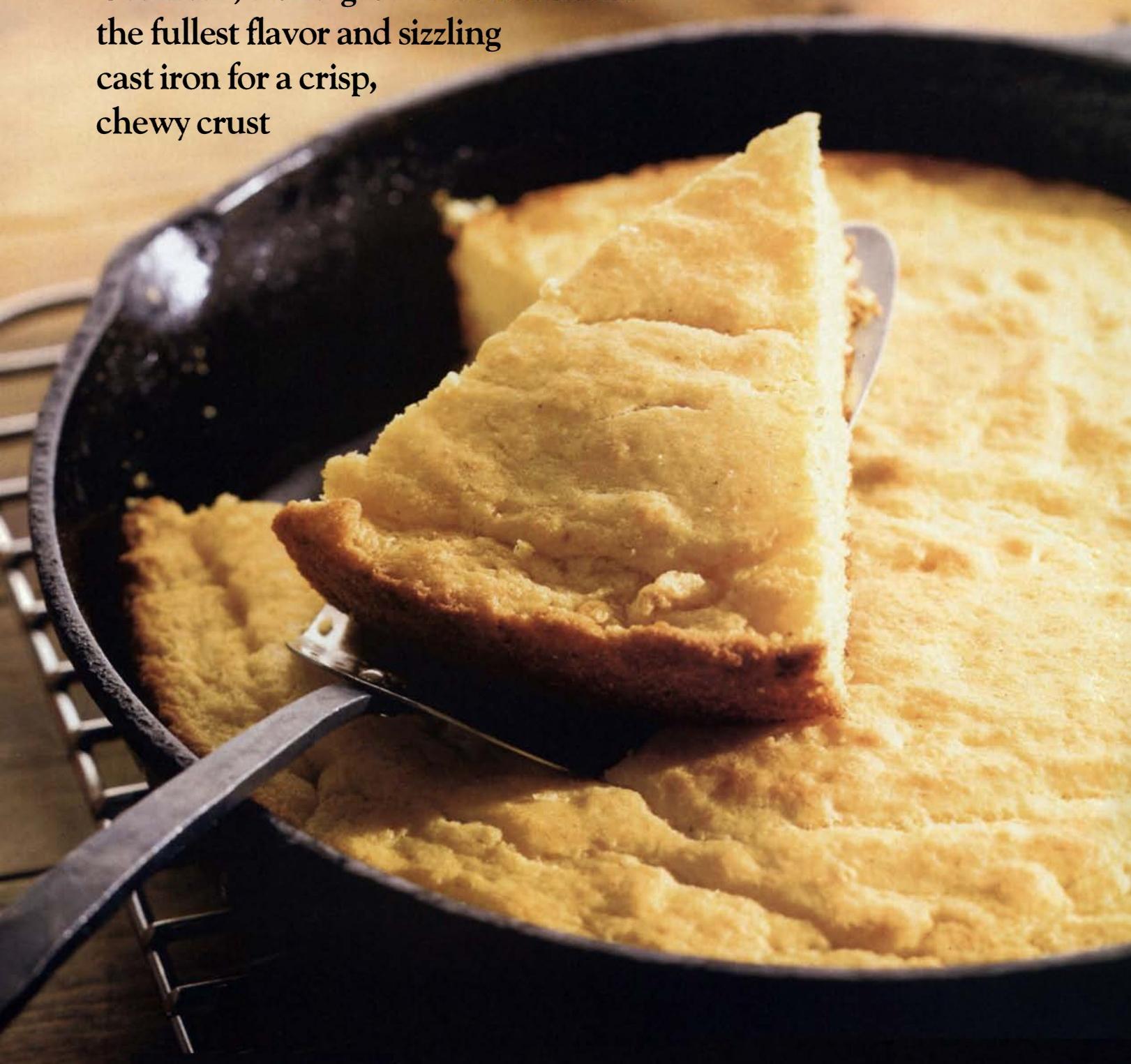
Bigger isn't necessarily better in a burger. The author says 5 ounces is the best size for a juicy finish. He calls larger burgers "chopped steak."



A flat-topped grill allows the pure flavor of the beef to come through. Don't smash the burger with the spatula as it cooks or you'll chase out the juices.

Cornbread is Speedy Yet Soulful

Use fresh, stone-ground cornmeal for the fullest flavor and sizzling cast iron for a crisp, chewy crust





A skillet full of warmth and comfort. Cornbread is so quick to make, and it tastes great any time of day.

BY CRESCENT DRAGONWAGON

Here in the Ozarks, as in many parts of the South, cornbread is revered, a food of choice and, in the past, of necessity. It meant survival during hard times, and there were plenty of those.

Three men—two young, one an old-timer—sat in front of an Ozarks country store one afternoon in the 1940s, back when “light bread” (commercially made yeast-risen white bread) first came to these parts. According to folklorist Vance Randolph, this soft, flimsy new breadstuff was not initially popular.

“I’d just as soon eat a wasp’s nest as eat that light bread,” said one of the young men, grimacing.

The second nodded. “I’d just as soon let the moonlight shine in my mouth as eat that stuff,” he said.

But the old-timer leaned back thoughtfully in his chair. “I don’t know, boys,” he said. “Light bread’s better’n nothing. *I’ve had both.*”

Light bread may be better than nothing, but good cornbread is much, *much* better than either. And it travels well to a more abundant table and time, too. At Dairy Hollow House, the country inn my husband and I own in Eureka Springs, Arkansas, cornbread is the single most requested recipe. I think of cornbread, round and golden in its black pan, as the sun around which the other culinary planets revolve.

GOOD CORNBREAD HAS A CRISP CRUST AND A TENDER CRUMB

Because of the southern passion for cornbread, discussion about it gets downright contentious. Cornbread recipes and traditions vary not only from state to state, but from hollow to hollow; however, a few principles stay consistent.

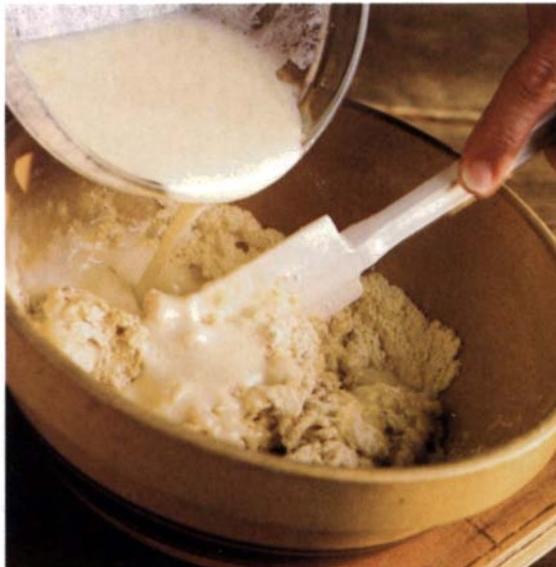
Fresh, stone-ground cornmeal is a must. It’s sweet and full of flavor, with a delectably coarse, uneven texture that gives the bread a pleasantly toothsome bite. Stone-ground meals (the corn kernels are pulverized between two specially formed stones) are usually made of whole, unadulterated corn.

Stone-ground meal is a whole food, so it’s more perishable than white flour (the germ’s vitamin E content can go rancid more quickly), and it’s apt to attract bugs. I buy freshly ground cornmeal straight from the mill (so can you; see sources on p. 47) and keep it sealed. If I don’t plan to use it right away, I freeze it and bring it to room temperature before baking.

White and yellow cornmeals are distinctive, so try both. The white, from white corn, is slightly more delicate and subtle in flavor, and it’s preferred throughout most of the South, especially in the Deep South. Yellow cornmeal (from yellow corn) is a bit sweeter and “cornier” than white. Yellow is used in the North and in the northern regions of some southern states,



Stir dry ingredients now, while you have the chance. As soon as the wet ingredients are added, you'll give just a few strokes.



A short, quick stir is the way to light cornbread batter. Go easy on the mixing so you don't beat down the batter.



Melted butter in a sizzling-hot skillet gives a crisp crust. You can use bacon fat, but butter brings out the corn flavor better.

like the Ozark Mountains, which run through Arkansas, Missouri, and Oklahoma.

A little sugar coaxes out cornmeal's natural sweetness. To sweeten or not is the most common cornbread argument. Some call the sweetened bread "Yankee," but my favorite is very slightly sweetened. I'm with those who say to use just enough sugar to make the cornbread as sweet as fresh sweet corn out of the garden. That said, unsweetened works well in dressings and stuffings, and I've learned to love its soulful plainness, too, especially with bean dishes.

Buttermilk makes a tender cornbread. The soured milk reacts with the baking powder and soda to help leaven the bread. This kind of leaven yields a delicate, textured bread that breaks into shaggy, uneven pieces when you pull it apart. Buttermilk's tanginess adds another subtle flavor dimension, and it tenderizes the gluten in batters that contain wheat flour.

CORNBREAD BATTER

NEEDS A QUICK STIR AND A HOT SKILLET

Cornbread is a quick bread, made speedily because it's leavened with baking powder and baking soda, rather than yeast. And you assemble it speedily, too.

Stir the batter just enough to moisten the dry ingredients with the wet: 20 or 30 seconds tops. The leavening begins working the second the acidic buttermilk hits the dry ingredients. Longer beating would stir down the bubbles and—especially for cornbreads with wheat flour—develop the gluten, making the bread tough and flat.

Melt the butter in sizzling cast iron before adding the batter. The best cornbread has lots of crust, which you get by melting fat in a hot cast-iron skillet and baking the cornbread in that skillet. Some still use bacon fat for its smoky flavor, but I prefer butter because the corn flavor comes through loud and clear.

Some heat the skillet on the stove, others in the oven. Either way, a hot skillet with hot fat gives crisp-crusted cornbread with a moist, tender crumb. The intense heat ensures that the batter's bottom crisps in the hot fat rather than absorbing it.

Cornbread may be quick bread, but it exudes warmth and comfort. A meal with it is timeless, and it's truly much better than light bread—and much, *much* better than nothing.

White cornmeal has a delicate, subtle flavor, while yellow cornmeal is sweeter.

Dairy Hollow House's Skillet-Sizzled Buttermilk Cornbread

Additional fat in the batter is optional: it does make for a richer, more tender cornbread that keeps a little longer.

Amounts for cornmeal, flour, and butter in these recipes are listed by weight (ounces) and by volume (cups and tablespoons); use either measurement. *Serves eight.*

5 oz. (1 cup) stone-ground yellow cornmeal
4½ oz. (1 cup) unbleached flour
½ tsp. salt
¼ tsp. baking soda
1 Tbs. baking powder
1 egg
¼ cup sugar
⅓ cup vegetable oil; more for the pan
1¼ cups buttermilk
1 oz. (2 Tbs.) butter

Heat the oven to 375°F. In a bowl, mix the cornmeal, flour, salt, baking soda, and baking powder. In a separate bowl, whisk together the egg, sugar, oil, and buttermilk. Coat a 10-inch cast-iron skillet with oil and set it over medium heat. Add the butter. As the skillet heats, quickly stir together the dry and wet ingredients in a bowl, using just enough strokes to combine. Don't beat or whisk.

When the butter has melted and the pan is quite hot, scrape the batter into it. The batter should sizzle as it goes into the pan. Immediately transfer the skillet to the oven. Bake until light brown around the edges, about 25 min. Cut in wedges and serve warm.

Ronni's Skillet-Sizzled Kentucky Buttermilk Cornbread

My friend Ronni Lundy grew up eating this Appalachian version. It's very different from mine, but equally wonderful. *Serves eight.*

**2 oz. (4 Tbs.) butter or bacon fat
9 oz. (2 cups) fine white cornmeal
1 tsp. salt
½ tsp. baking soda
½ tsp. baking powder
1 egg
1½ cups buttermilk**

Heat the oven to 450°F. Put the butter in a 9- or 10-inch cast-iron skillet and put the skillet in the oven to heat. In a bowl, combine the cornmeal, salt, baking soda, and baking powder. In a separate bowl, beat together the egg and buttermilk. Combine the two mixtures, using just enough strokes to combine. Take the hot skillet from the oven; swirl it so the fat coats the bottom and lower half of



the sides. Pour the hot fat into the batter, stir a few times, and turn the batter into the skillet. Bake until golden brown, 20 to 25 min.

Double-Corn Tex-Mex Cornbread with Cheese & Green Chiles

This is also delicious with sautéed onion or red bell pepper added. *Serves eight.*

**5 oz. (1 cup) stone-ground yellow cornmeal
4½ oz. (1 cup) unbleached flour
¾ tsp. salt
¼ tsp. baking soda
1 Tbs. baking powder
1 egg
2 Tbs. sugar
¼ cup vegetable oil; more for the pan
1¼ cups buttermilk
1 oz. (2 Tbs.) butter
1 cup grated extra-sharp Cheddar cheese (4 oz.)
Fresh kernels cut from two ears of corn (about 1½ cups)
3 Tbs. finely diced fresh serrano or jalapeño chiles**

Heat the oven to 375°F. In a bowl, mix the cornmeal, flour, salt, baking soda, and baking powder. In a separate bowl, whisk together the egg, sugar, oil, and buttermilk. Coat a 10-inch cast-iron skillet with oil and set it over medium heat. Add the butter. As the skillet heats, quickly stir together the dry and wet ingredients in a bowl, using just enough strokes to combine. Don't beat or whisk. Stir in the cheese, corn, and chiles.

When the butter has melted and the pan is quite hot, scrape the batter into it; the batter should sizzle as it goes into the pan. Immediately transfer the skillet to the oven. Bake until light brown around the edges, about 25 min. Cut in wedges and serve warm.

MEAL BY MAIL

We use organic stone-ground cornmeal that's ground in the Ozarks. Order it from War Eagle Mill, 501/789-5343. King Arthur Flour, 800/827-6836, also has good stone-ground meal.

"Though I believe in straightforward cornbread, it does take well to variation," says Crescent Dragonwagon of her Double-Corn Tex-Mex Cornbread with Cheese & Green Chiles.



Kentucky Buttermilk Cornbread uses white cornmeal. White cornmeal is subtler and less "corny" than yellow.

Crescent Dragonwagon writes cookbooks and children's books in Eureka Springs, Arkansas. ♦

Silky, Sumptuous Chocolate Pudding

A creamy custard that's both homey and sophisticated begins with top-notch chocolate

BY DAVID PAGE & BARBARA SHINN

Toward the end of the evening, as the noise level in our restaurant subsides, we can hear the telltale sound of our customers enjoying every last bit of the chocolate pudding we serve. It's the sound of a dessertspoon scraping anxiously against the bottom of a ceramic ramekin. When we don't hear any spoons clinking, it usually means that the pudding eater has moved on to using a finger to clean the dish of any remaining chocolate streaks.

Part of the pudding's appeal is that it's homey and straightforward, yet it's so different from what most people think of chocolate pudding. Accustomed to "fast-food" puddings that are loaded with artificial ingredients and preservatives, customers are delighted to discover our version, made rich and smooth with high-quality chocolate.

What many of our customers haven't discovered is just how easy this pudding is to make. Follow the suggestions offered here, and you'll be licking clean your own bowl of homemade pudding.

GREAT CHOCOLATE BEGETS GREAT PUDDING

Because there are so few ingredients in the pudding—chocolate, egg yolks, cream, sugar, vanilla, and salt—each must be of the best quality. Fresh heavy cream and fresh eggs help guarantee a rich custard, but it's the chocolate that matters most, so use the best you can find.

We make our pudding with Valrhôna bittersweet chocolate. Aside from its magnificent flavor, the chocolate contains a high amount of cocoa butter, giving it a luscious, smooth texture and wonderful

melting qualities. You can find Valrhôna and other fine brands of chocolate, such as Callebaut and Lindt, in some supermarkets and at specialty food shops.

To safely melt the chocolate, pour hot cream over it. This off-the-stove method is safer than melting the chocolate alone; it keeps the chocolate from overheating and separating, and it eliminates the possibility of the chocolate seizing—turning into a grainy mess—which can occur if a small amount of liquid comes in contact with the melting chocolate.

When all the ingredients are combined, the mixture is strained to remove any clumps of chocolate or undissolved sugar that remain. At the restaurant, we usually strain the pudding into a large container with a pour spout to make filling the individual ramekins easier, but you can simply strain it into a bowl and use a ladle to fill your containers. You can also bake the pudding in a large custard dish, something we did once when a customer requested the pudding as a surprise birthday "cake" for his girlfriend.

BAKE GENTLY AND CHILL THOROUGHLY

A water bath cooks the pudding evenly and keeps the eggs and cream from curdling. A baking pan that's a little deeper than your molds makes a good water bath. Put the molds in the pan and carefully pour hot water in the pan to come about halfway up the sides of the molds. Covering the pan with foil keeps the pudding from cooking too quickly and forming a skin.

The pudding then gets baked in a 300°F oven; the relatively low temperature also prevents curdling.



Straining the pudding leaves it silky smooth. You don't want any clumps of unmelted chocolate, bits of egg, or undissolved sugar.



Photos: Mark Thomas

Cooking time depends on the size and thickness of your molds; large molds need more time than small, and thick-walled molds take longer than thin.

The pudding is finished sooner than you might think. If you're using standard ramekins, your pudding should cook in about an hour. You should see a lighter colored spot about the size of a quarter on top of the custard when it's ready to come out of the oven. Because we're not sure why that's so, we also judge the pudding for doneness by carefully jiggling it. If it's no longer runny and it shakes like Jell-O, take it out of the oven. Remember that the pudding continues to cook and thicken even after it's out of the oven, so it should come out when it's slightly underdone. Cooking the pudding too long can wreck its texture.

Refrigerate the pudding until it's chilled through, a good three hours. Keep the pudding covered if you want to prevent a skin from forming on top. Serve it unadorned or with a little whipped cream on top and listen for the spoons.



Chocolate Pudding from "Home"

At the restaurant, we make this pudding in individual ramekins. You can also use coffee cups or any other dish that can withstand temperatures of 300°F. Yields 5½ cups; serves six to eight.

8 oz. bittersweet chocolate, preferably Valrhôna

½ cup sugar, to be divided

6 egg yolks

4 cups heavy cream

1 tsp. vanilla extract

¼ tsp. salt

Coarsely chop the chocolate and reserve it in a large mixing bowl. In a medium bowl, whisk ¼ cup of the sugar into the egg yolks. In a medium saucepan, mix the remaining ¼ cup sugar with the cream and the vanilla extract. Heat the cream to just below the boiling point. Add a little of the cream to the eggs and stir vigorously for smoother mixing; set aside. Pour the rest of the hot cream over the chopped chocolate. Gently stir the chocolate with a spatula until it has melted. Add the egg-cream mixture and the salt to the chocolate and stir to mix. Strain the pudding into a pitcher or a bowl.

Heat the oven to 300°F. Fill six 8-oz. ramekins or eight 6-oz. ramekins with the pudding, leaving at least ¼ inch space at the top. Put the ramekins in a baking pan not more than 1 inch deeper than your molds. Fill the pan with warm water about halfway up the sides of the molds. Cover the pan with foil and bake the pudding in the water bath until no longer runny, about 1 hour. When cooked, a lighter colored spot about the size of a quarter appears on top. Cover the pudding and refrigerate for at least 3 hours before serving.

David Page and Barbara Shinn own Home Restaurant in New York City. ♦

Rich and luscious, yet familiar and comforting. Few desserts can top the sweet simplicity of chocolate pudding.



Tiny Capers Give Exuberant Flavor

Add zing to all kinds of dishes, from hot-and-sour chickpea soup to tomato-rich braised chicken

BY ROBERT WEMISCHNER

My fridge and cabinets are filled with all sorts of condiments, but when I want to give a dish a bright burst of tartness, I reach for capers. They're a staple of the Mediterranean pantry, and a staple of my pantry, too. Capers may look nondescript in their shiny glass jars, but they're my secret weapon. Those green buds from a prickly, sun-baked shrub can really make a dish sing.

Capers provide a flavor kick far out of proportion to their small size, adding a zestiness that's as warm as their native Mediterranean. They add tang to northern cooking, too. You can use capers to brighten all sorts of dishes—soups, salads, stews, pastas, grilled fish, chicken, chops, and more.

CHOOSE SALT-PACKED CAPERS FOR PURER FLAVOR

Capers come pickled in vinegar-based brine or preserved in coarse sea salt. Though the brined ones are easiest to come by and taste just fine, I prefer salt-packed capers. They lose none of their taste to the vinegar brine, and they retain a chewier texture.

The smallest capers are called nonpareilles (pronounced non-puh-REHL), and they're about the size of peppercorns. They're what you'll find in the supermarket in slender bottles. Capers are classed by size, and though it's only sometimes that you see them labeled as such, I think the names are kind of neat. In ascending order of size, they're called *surfines* (7 to 8mm), *capucines* (8 to 9mm), *capotes* (9 to 11mm), *fines* (11 to 13mm), and *gruesas* (13mm and up).

Different-sized capers don't vary in taste, but a bigger caper naturally delivers more flavor per bite. It's a question of preference and aesthetics as to

which size capers you like in a particular dish. Some people prefer smaller buds because they scatter more evenly through a dish, lending flavor to every mouthful.

Whatever size capers you choose, they should be uniform in size; this means consistent quality throughout the batch. If you're buying capers packed in salt, be sure that the salt is white or pale yellow. Darker salt means the capers are rancid.

Stores specializing in Mediterranean ingredients offer the widest selection, best prices, and freshest supplies of capers. Major caper-producing countries include Turkey, Morocco, Italy (especially good capers come from the Sicilian island of Pantelleria), France, Greece, and Spain.

ALL CAPERS NEED RINSING

Both brined and salt-packed capers need to be soaked before they're added to the other ingredients; the buds' flavor and texture shine through more clearly that way. Certain recipes, however, like the Spanish-style chicken on p. 52, take well to the extra caper flavor you'll get by draining, but not washing, brined capers.

Soak brine-packed capers in a few changes of cold water and gently rinse them in a sieve (save the brine to cover any remaining capers, which you should refrigerate after the bottle is opened). Soak salt-packed capers in cold water, and then drain and rinse them (I like to give about four rinsings, which



All capers need rinsing. The flavor and texture of both brined and salt-packed capers comes through more clearly that way.



*Capers come packed
in brine or in salt.
Salt-packed capers
maintain their flavor
and texture better
than those packed
in brine.*



takes about half an hour). Even after soaking, capers are still salty, so you'll likely need little or no additional salt for the dish you're preparing.

An opened jar of brined capers will stay fresh for about three months in the refrigerator, and an opened bag of salt-packed capers will keep refrigerated for up to two months. If you have leftover soaked and rinsed salt-packed capers, just cover them with mild vinegar in a glass jar, refrigerate them, and try to use them within a few days.

JUST A SMATTERING ADDS BIG FLAVOR

I think capers are great if you don't have time for making involved sauces—they add big flavor, fast. Use capers sparingly and toss them in near the end of the cooking time; long cooking tends to mute their lively taste and crunchy texture. Capers are especially good combined with other tart, salty, or pickled ingredients, such as lemons, anchovies, olives, tomatoes, garlic, and vinegar.

Capers are from the Mediterranean, but they're used in northern cooking, too. You'll find them in Danish steak tartare, Scandinavian smorgasbords, and German pork dumplings.

Capers punch up other flavors in a recipe, which makes it fun to experiment. Remember that they're an assertive presence, even in small amounts. To be sure you don't overdo it, taste as you go.

Pollo Alcaparrado (Spanish-Style Braised Chicken)

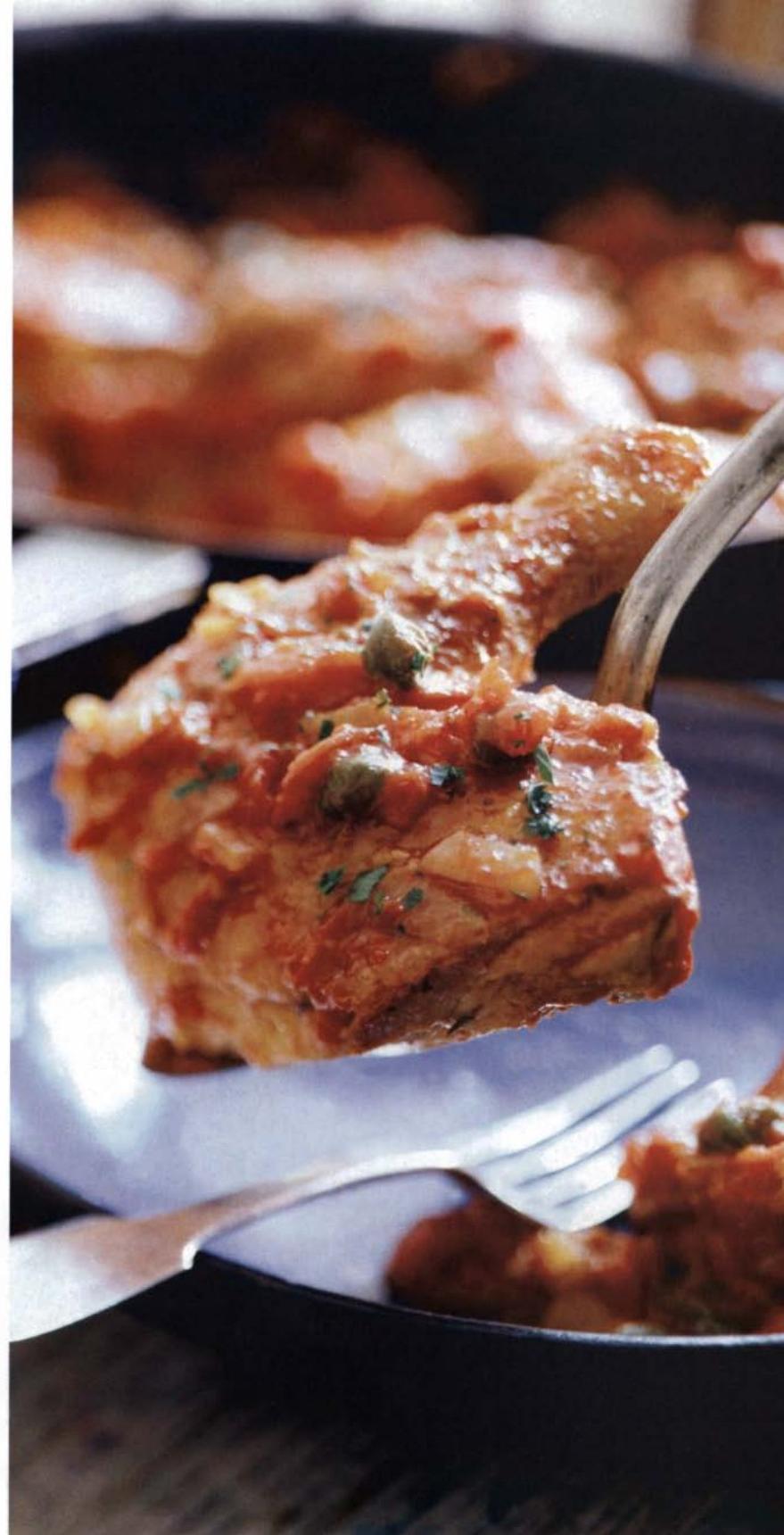
Crusty peasant bread and dry white wine from Spain, Italy, or Greece are excellent companions for this dish.
Serves four to six.

3 lb. chicken pieces
Salt and freshly ground black pepper
Flour for dredging
3 Tbs. extra-virgin olive oil, approximately
1 cup dry white wine
4 cloves garlic, crushed or minced
1 cup coarsely chopped onion
2 lb. fresh tomatoes, peeled, seeded, excess juice removed, and chopped, or two 28-oz. cans of peeled plum tomatoes, well drained, seeded, and chopped (3 cups)
½ cup drained large capers
⅓ cup finely chopped flat-leaf parsley

Lightly sprinkle the chicken with salt and pepper. Dredge it in the flour, shaking off any excess. Pour a scant $\frac{1}{8}$ inch olive oil into a large, heavy skillet and heat the oil until it's almost smoking. Brown as many chicken pieces as you can fit in one uncrowded layer. Cook the chicken until it's well browned, about 5 min., and then turn to brown the other side. Transfer to a platter.

Pour off excess fat from the pan, add the wine, and deglaze over high heat, using a wooden spoon to dislodge any browned bits clinging to the pan. Simmer 1 min. Add the garlic and onion and cook over moderate heat until tender, stirring occasionally, 5 to 7 min.

Stir in the tomatoes and return the chicken and any juices to the pan (the liquid should barely cover the



Capers punch up other flavors in a recipe and help them work in tantalizing concert, as in this Spanish-Style Braised Chicken with tomatoes, garlic, and onion.



chicken). Cook, covered, over medium-low heat, until the chicken is tender when pierced with a knife, about 40 min. Transfer the chicken to a warm serving platter. Boil the sauce over high heat until slightly reduced. Stir in the capers, taste, and adjust seasonings, keeping in mind that capers add salt. Pour the sauce over the chicken, garnish with the parsley, and serve immediately.

Tunisian-Style Chickpea Soup

Harissa is a hot pepper paste you'll find in most Middle Eastern markets. One dollop turns up the heat in this make-ahead soup. Cooking the chickpeas in the oven keeps the stovetop free for other cooking. *Serves four:*

**1½ cups dried chickpeas, washed and picked over
2 bay leaves
1 Tbs. cumin seeds
2 Tbs. olive oil (the fruitier the better)
1 cup coarsely chopped onion
4 cloves garlic, crushed or minced
1 Tbs. harissa or hot sauce; more or less to taste
1 Tbs. salt
1½ to 3 Tbs. lemon juice or white-wine vinegar
4 medium stale pita or other flatbread, torn or cut into rough pieces (3 to 4 cups)
¼ cup large capers, soaked, rinsed, and drained
2 Tbs. finely chopped flat-leaf parsley
Extra-virgin olive oil for drizzling
8 lemon wedges (optional)**

Soak the chickpeas overnight in about 6 cups water. Drain and transfer them to an ovenproof casserole, along with the bay leaves and enough water to cover



Capers are from the Mediterranean, but northern cuisines benefit from their sassy kick, too, as in this Scandinavian-Style Potato Salad.

A scrubby bush yields tasty capers



I was surprised when I first learned that those tiny, elegant capers in the tall, slim jar are actually the preserved buds of the scrubby, prickly Mediterranean caper bush.

Just before the buds burst into bloom, they're harvested and soaked in open-air barrels of salt and water. The resulting lactic fermentation draws out acidity and bitterness. Though some claim that the buds produced by wild plants are better, you can find excellent cultivated capers, too.

Caper buds are aged for a month or two before they're repeatedly washed, re-brined, and fermented. Finally, they're cleaned, sorted, and packaged.

Besides caper buds, caper bushes yield berries when buds are left to flower. After the white and purple blossom fades, the pistil develops into large, fleshy, olive-shaped fruits, which you'll find preserved in brine with their stems attached. Caper berries taste like buds, with a pleasant soft-crunchy texture. They add pep to salads, and make a great martini garnish.

the chickpeas by 1½ inches. Bake uncovered at 325°F until you can pierce the chickpeas easily with a knife, about 2 hours; most should stay intact. (During baking, add more water if needed.) Set aside.

While the chickpeas are cooking, toast the cumin seeds in a heavy skillet over medium heat until fragrant but not brown, about 5 min. Grind them to a fine powder with an electric spice grinder or a mortar and pestle. Set aside.

In a large, heavy saucepan over medium heat, warm the oil until fragrant. Cook the onion, stirring, until

**Go easy on the salt when
you cook with capers—these
briny buds give a zingy kick
far out of proportion
to their small size.**

tender but not browned, 5 to 7 min. Stir in the garlic and cook for 1 min. Add the *harissa* and ground cumin; cook briefly, just until fragrant. Add the cooked chickpeas, their liquid, and the salt; simmer until the onions have disintegrated, about 1 hour. Remove the pan from the heat; season with the lemon juice or vinegar to taste. Remove and discard the bay leaves, taste, and adjust the seasonings.

Divide the pita among four heated soup bowls. Spoon the chickpeas over the bread with equal portions of the liquid. Sprinkle with the capers and parsley, and add more *harissa* to taste. Just before serving, drizzle a bit of olive oil over each bowl. Serve lemon wedges on the side if you like extra tartness.

Scandinavian-Style Potato Salad

If you don't have a fine sieve to drain the yogurt, line a regular sieve with a coffee filter. *Serves four.*

FOR THE SALAD:

*2 lb. small red potatoes
4 hard-cooked eggs, peeled and quartered
¼ cup finely chopped onion
4 Tbs. capers, rinsed a few times in cold water
2 Tbs. finely snipped fresh chives
Butter or red-leaf lettuce leaves*

FOR THE DRESSING:

*1 Tbs. Dijon mustard
1 Tbs. mayonnaise
1 Tbs. extra-virgin olive oil
2 to 3 Tbs. lemon juice
½ cup nonfat yogurt, drained in a fine sieve in the refrigerator for 4 hours
Freshly ground black pepper to taste*

Boil the potatoes in lightly salted water until tender, 15 to 20 min. Drain the potatoes, refresh them in cold water, and press them dry with a kitchen towel. Cut them in half, or in quarters if they're large. Set aside to cool.



Mediterranean comfort food. Capers season this satisfying Tunisian-Style Chickpea Soup with a warm burst of flavor.



Caper butter is a versatile, handy flavoring. At the last minute, drop a slice on fish, chicken, chops, vegetables, potatoes, or pasta. The compound butter keeps for weeks in the freezer.

Make the dressing—In a small bowl, whisk together the mustard, mayonnaise, olive oil, and lemon juice until the mixture is smooth. Whisk in the yogurt. Add pepper to taste.

Put the potatoes and three of the eggs in a bowl. Sprinkle in the onion, capers, and chives. Gently toss in the dressing, taking care to keep the potatoes intact. Garnish the salad with the reserved egg quarters and the lettuce.

Caper Butter

This compound butter is as good on grilled vegetables as it is on chicken, fish, steak, rice, potatoes, or pasta. Wrapped tightly, caper butter keeps well in the fridge for about five days and in the freezer for a month. Yields one 6x1-inch log.

4 oz. unsalted butter, softened
1 Tbs. capers, drained, washed, patted dry, and finely chopped
1 tsp. finely minced Kalamata or other good-quality black olives
1 tsp. grated lemon zest
Freshly ground black pepper to taste

Cream the butter. Add the capers, olives, and lemon zest. Add pepper to taste. Shape the butter into a log about 1 inch in diameter by 6 inches long. Wrap tightly and refrigerate until serving time, or freeze it if you're making it in advance. Before serving, let the butter soften enough so that you can easily slice it into medallions.

CAPERS BY MAIL

Adriana's Caravan, 409 Vanderbilt St., Brooklyn, NY 11218; 800/316-0820; brined and salt-packed capers.

Dean & DeLuca, 560 Broadway, New York, NY 10012; 212/226-6800, ext. 268; brined and salt-packed capers.

The Pasta Shop, 5655 College Ave., Oakland, CA 94618; 510/547-4005; brined and salt-packed capers.

Zingerman's Deli, 422 Detroit St., Ann Arbor, MI 48104; 313/769-1625; salt-packed capers.

Robert Wemischner wrote *The Vivid Flavors Cookbook* (Lowell House, 1994) and is co-author, with Karen Karp, of *Gourmet to Go: A Guide to Opening & Operating a Specialty Foods Store*, to be published this spring by John Wiley & Sons. ♦



A beer and flour batter makes a crisp, tender coating for onions. Let your guests salt them at the table so the onion rings don't get soggy.

Deep-Fried Foods that Sizzle with Flavor

High heat, a heavy pot, and fresh oil are the keys to crisp, grease-free favorites like onion rings, fried shrimp, and hushpuppies



Cast iron holds the heat. Fry in a large, heavy pot and lots of fresh oil. A thermometer helps you maintain the proper temperature.

BY JOHN MARTIN TAYLOR

Say what you will, we all love fried food. Few of us can resist a platter of golden onion rings or shrimp that are perfectly crisp outside, moist and tender on the inside, and totally greaseless. Unfortunately, deep-fat frying has garnered a bad reputation in recent years. Even experienced home cooks tend to think of it as difficult and messy, something best left to professionals. It's true that when done poorly, deep-fried foods can be greasy, limp, and not always appetizing, but there's really nothing difficult about deep-fat frying. If you have a decent ventilation system (anything from a fancy hood to an open window), an accurate thermometer, and a heavy pot, there's no reason not to enjoy perfectly fried food at home.

All sorts of foods can be deep-fried, from herb leaves to entire turkeys. Vegetables—especially onions for light, crisp onion rings and potatoes for french fries—are obvious choices. Golden fried shrimp are a perennial favorite, as are all sorts of seafood and, of course, fried chicken. Slices of fruit

can be coated with batter to make irresistible fritters. Even simple doughs can be fried: think of doughnuts and the southern favorite, hushpuppies, featured here. Face it, almost anything tastes great fried. Deep-fried turkeys are a Cajun specialty that's surprisingly delicious, but I'll leave the discussion of that technique for another story.

START WITH A LARGE POT AND THE RIGHT OIL

I prefer to use large cast-iron pots when I fry—the bigger the better. Cast iron conducts heat evenly and holds it for a long time. Fats catch fire quickly; be sure your pot is wider than the heat source so that if any fat splashes out, it won't land right on the burner and ignite. The pot should be deep enough for the oil to bubble freely without danger of overflowing. I find that Dutch ovens work well.

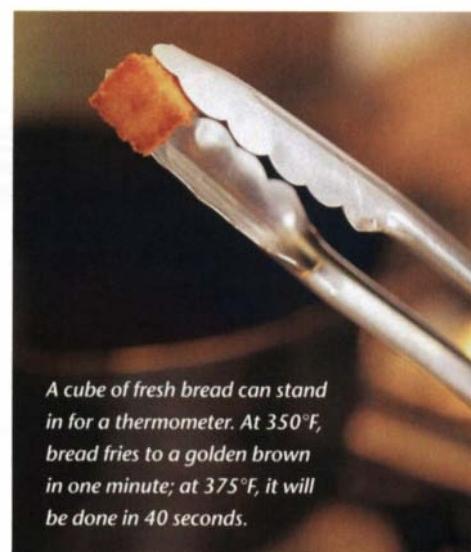
Don't be overly cautious and try to fry in a skimpy amount of oil. Foods fry best when they're surrounded by hot oil. A large amount of oil in your pot will actually help keep foods from becoming greasy, as they'll fry faster and absorb less fat. Also, the larger the quantity of oil, the easier it is to maintain the high temperatures necessary for perfect frying: the oil temperature won't be lowered much when you add the food. Just be sure you use a pot that's large enough to hold all the oil you need and still leave you with several inches of head room. A good guideline is to fill the pot no more than one-third of the way with oil.

Choose an oil with a high smoking point and watch the temperature.

Sometimes I fry in fresh, home-rendered lard, but I usually use peanut oil. What's important is to choose an oil that has a smoking point well over the frying temperature. Most deep-frying recipes call for temperatures from 350° to 375°F. Many animal fats will burn at 375°; peanut oil won't smoke or break down until it reaches 425°. I fry nearly everything at 365°. If the oil goes above 375°, you risk burning the outside of the food before it's cooked through.

Use an accurate thermometer and constantly monitor the heat. It's important to keep the temperature from dropping below 340°, the point at which the foods would begin to absorb oil. If you don't have a thermometer, a fairly accurate test of temperature can be done with a cube of home-style white bread (see the photo at right). A very few raw doughs can be fried crisp at temperatures slightly lower than 340°, but they're the exception, not the rule.

Add food gently to the oil and drain the excess when cooked. Many chefs use frying baskets for lowering foods into and raising them out of the hot oil. I prefer spring-loaded tongs or wire-mesh



A cube of fresh bread can stand in for a thermometer. At 350°F, bread fries to a golden brown in one minute; at 375°F, it will be done in 40 seconds.

skimmers because batters often stick to baskets. I immerse the food a little at a time so that the temperature of the oil doesn't suddenly drop below 340°. Don't use slotted spoons; oil tends to gather in them.

Drain all deep-fried foods well before serving.

When you take fried food from the pot, hold it over the oil for a few seconds to let excess oil drip back into the pot. Don't set the food on paper towels to drain: it would just sit in a puddle of its own grease. The best method I've found for draining fried food is to put it on a cooling rack set over a baking sheet to collect the oil that drains off. If you have more than one batch of food to fry, set your oven to the lowest tem-



For the lightest, most tender onion rings, whisk the batter only until the ingredients are just combined. Let the batter sit for at least an hour before using.

perature and put the rack and baking sheet in the oven to keep the food warm while you continue to fry.

When you're finished frying, allow the oil to cool before you move the pot. Oil for frying can be used more than once, so when the oil no longer poses a danger of burning you, filter it into a clean pot. I pour it through a sieve lined with a paper coffee filter into a container with a tight-fitting lid; I store it in a cool, dark place. Some foods, particularly fish, will flavor the oil, so make a note of what you've fried. Your apple fritters won't taste too good if the oil has been used once to fry shrimp. And don't fry in the same oil more than a few times: reheating breaks down an oil, lowering its smoking point; it also makes it more prone to rancidity. Before using any oil again, smell it to be sure it's still fresh. If not, discard it and use new oil.

BATTERS AND BREADINGS KEEP FRIED FOODS MOIST

Coating foods with a batter, flour, or crumbs before

frying keeps them from drying out by sealing in their natural moisture, and it protects them from the intense heat of deep-frying. Breadings and batters also add flavor and a wonderful, crisp texture to fried food. Some foods, such as fish fillets and poultry, fry perfectly with a light dusting of flour or cornmeal; others need denser coatings to protect them while they fry. A common breading for cubes of cheese,



Look for large, flat onions. They'll separate nicely into rings almost all the way to the center. Save the middles to use in a salad or other dish.

vegetables, and delicate seafoods is a dusting of flour followed by a dip in beaten egg and then in crumbs.

Batters are usually made with eggs beaten into flour or another starch. They should be thick enough to coat the foods they protect but thin enough to pour. Water makes the lightest batter, milk adds a silken quality and browns more readily, while beer makes a batter that's airy and full of flavor.



Dip cut onions into the batter. Be sure they're completely coated, and let any excess batter drip back into the bowl.

Fried Onion Rings

This batter calls for beer—something most southerners always have on hand. I like to invite my guests to enjoy a cocktail while I fry the onions; then I offer baskets of onion rings fresh from the fryer. Make the batter at least an hour before you plan to fry, as it needs to rest. *Serves eight.*

2 cups flour
¾ tsp. salt
12 oz. flat beer at room temperature
¼ cup peanut oil; more for frying
4 large, rather flat onions (about ¾ lb. each)
2 egg whites



In a large bowl, combine the flour and salt. Combine the beer and oil and pour into the flour mixture, stirring all the while with a whisk until just combined. Don't beat the batter. Let stand for at least 1 hour.

Peel the onions, cut them into ½-inch slices and carefully separate them into rings. Heat at least 2 inches of oil in a large pot over high heat. While the oil is heating, beat the egg whites until they hold stiff peaks. Gently fold the whites into the batter. When the oil reaches 365°F, dip the rings into the batter and then drop them into the oil; don't crowd the pot. Fry until golden brown, 2 to 3 min. on each side. Remove the rings with a wire-mesh strainer and let excess oil drip back into the pot. Drain on a rack set over a baking sheet and serve when you have a plateful. Wait for the oil to return to 365° before adding the next batch; try to maintain that temperature as you fry. Have guests salt their onion rings at the table.

Fried Shrimp

This recipe comes from the Edisto Motel Restaurant in Jacksonboro, South Carolina. Folks there stand in line for hours to eat the delicious fried seafood and to be pampered by the Hickman family. Sisters Zelma Hickman and Doris Cook will tell you that there's no secret to their artful frying—just clean, hot grease and fresh local shrimp. *Serves four.*



Don't crowd the pot. Adding too many onions at once can cause the oil's temperature to drop, and your onion rings will be greasy rather than light and crisp.

Peanut oil for frying
2 large eggs
1 cup milk
1 tsp. salt
2 lb. fresh small shrimp, peeled and deveined, tails intact
1 cup cracker meal, corn flour, or very fine dry breadcrumbs (see note on p. 60)

Pour 3 inches of oil into a stockpot or Dutch oven and set over medium-high heat. In a bowl, beat the eggs with the milk and salt and add the shrimp, making sure all the shrimp are coated. Put the shrimp in a sieve and shake well to remove excess liquid. Spread the cracker meal on a plate.

When the oil reaches 365°F, roll the shrimp in the cracker meal and put them in a dry sieve. Shake off excess meal over the plate. Fry the shrimp in batches in the hot oil until golden brown, 1 to 2 min. Remove the shrimp from the oil with a wire-mesh strainer and let excess oil drip back into the pot. Drain on a rack set over a baking sheet. Serve hot with hushpuppies and cocktail sauce.

Cocktail Sauce

No plate of fried shrimp would be complete without some of this simple-to-make, classic cocktail sauce. *Yields about 1 ¼ cups.*

1 cup ketchup
2 Tbs. horseradish (fresh or prepared); more to taste
2 tsp. fresh lemon juice
Hot sauce to taste

Combine the ketchup, horseradish, lemon juice, and hot sauce. Refrigerate for at least 45 min. to let the flavors develop. Bring to room temperature before serving.

Hushpuppies

Hushpuppies are traditionally made after seafood is fried; the batter is thickened with the leftover breading from the fish. If you plan to serve these with the fried shrimp, just use whatever breading remains from dusting the shrimp to thicken the pup batter. *Yields about 4 dozen.*

Peanut oil for frying
1 egg
2 cups buttermilk
1 ¾ cups stone-ground whole-grain cornmeal (see note on p. 60)

(Ingredient list continues)



Onion rings stay crisp when set on a cooling rack on top of a baking sheet. Don't drain fried foods on paper towels, where they'll simply sit in a puddle of grease.

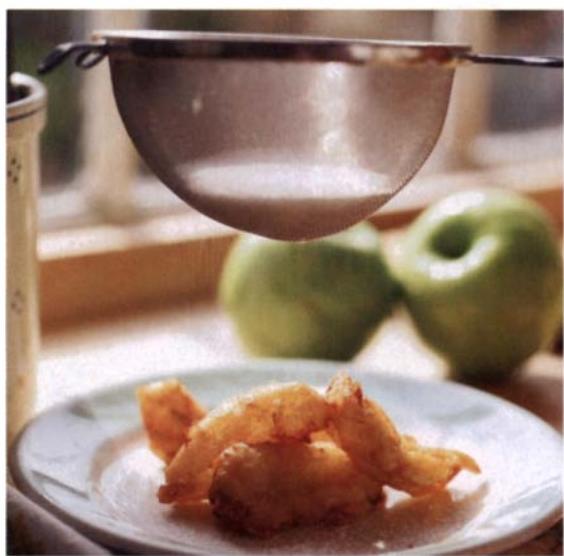
1/2 cup minced onion
 1 scant tsp. baking powder
 1 scant tsp. salt
 1 scant tsp. baking soda
 1/2 to 3/4 cup corn flour, fine cornmeal, or cracker meal
 (see note below right)

Pour 3 inches of oil in a stockpot or Dutch oven and set over medium heat. In a large bowl, combine the egg and buttermilk. Stir in the cornmeal until well blended and then stir in the onion. Add the baking powder, salt, and baking soda.

When the oil has reached 365°F, drop spoonfuls of the hushpuppy batter into the hot oil using two teaspoons:



You can't beat the flavor and crunch of freshly fried shrimp. Hot hushpuppies and homemade cocktail sauce are the perfect accompaniments for a traditional southern fish fry.



A light dusting of sugar is the finishing touch for fresh apple fritters. Serve them while they're hot.

one to scoop up the batter and one to scrape it off. Fry until golden brown all over, about 3 min., adjusting the heat if necessary to control the oil temperature. Remove the hushpuppies from the oil with a wire-mesh strainer and let excess oil drip back into the pot. Drain on a rack set over a baking sheet. Serve hot.

Apple Fritters

I've adapted this recipe from one printed in *Orangeburg's Choice Recipes*, a cookbook published by the Orangeburg, South Carolina, PTA in 1948. The light batter works equally well with pears and plums. Serves four.

3 large tart eating apples, such as *Granny Smith*
 1 Tbs. plus 1 tsp. fresh lemon juice
 3 Tbs. sugar; more for dusting
 Peanut oil for frying
 3/4 cup flour
 1/4 tsp. salt
 2 eggs, separated
 1/2 cup water
 1 tsp. unsalted butter, melted

Peel and core the apples. Cut them into slices about 1/3 inch thick and put them in a bowl. Sprinkle with 1 Tbs. of the lemon juice and the sugar. Toss well and let stand for 30 min.

Pour 3 inches of oil in a stockpot or Dutch oven and set it over medium heat. Heat the oven to the lowest setting. In a medium bowl, sift together the flour and salt. Lightly beat the egg yolks with the remaining 1 tsp. lemon juice and 1/4 cup of the water. Make a hollow in the center of the flour mixture and pour the egg-yolk mixture into it. Mix well. Add the remaining 1/4 cup water and the butter, beating hard and pressing the batter against the bowl to break up any lumps.

Beat the egg whites until stiff and fold them into the batter. When the oil has reached 365°F, drain the apple slices well and then drop several into the batter. Pick up the slices one at a time, allow excess batter to drain off, and drop them into the hot oil. Don't crowd the pot and make sure the oil stays between 350° and 365°. Cook until the batter is golden brown, about 3 min. Remove the fritters from the oil with a wire-mesh strainer and let excess oil drip back into the pot. Drain on a rack set over a baking sheet. Put the rack and the baking sheet in the oven to keep the fritters warm while you fry the remaining apple slices. When all the slices are fried, sprinkle with sugar and serve immediately.

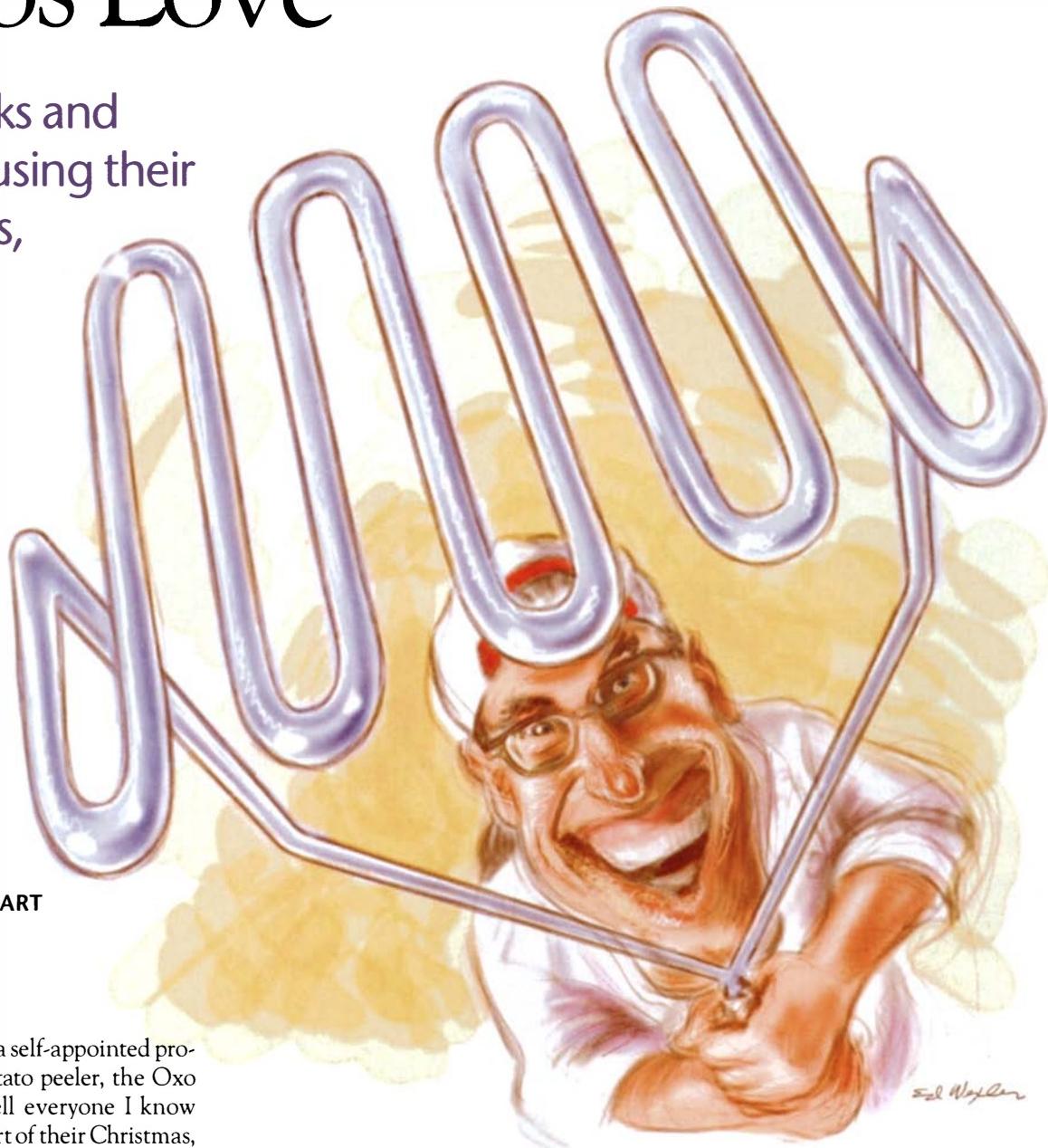
NOTE:

Cracker meal is widely available from southern grocers. Martha White makes an unadulterated product that's 100% flour; call 800/663-6317 for a source near you. **Corn flour** is the finest grind of cornmeal; it's used to dust fish and vegetables before frying. In some places down South it's called "fish fry." You can make your own by grinding cornmeal to a finer consistency in a blender or food processor. I have whole-grain cornmeal and corn flour ground for me in the mountains of Georgia. If you can't find good cornmeal, you can order it from my bookstore in Charleston (803/577-6404).

John Martin Taylor is the owner of Hoppin' John's, a culinary bookstore in Charleston, South Carolina. He's the author of four cookbooks, including Fearless Frying Cookbook (Workman, 1997). ♦

Learn to Use the Tools the Pros Love

Chefs share tricks and techniques for using their favorite gadgets, from blenders to blowtorches



BY JOANNE McALLISTER SMART

Recently I have become a self-appointed promoter for a certain potato peeler, the Oxo Good Grips swivel model. I tell everyone I know about it. I buy it for people as part of their Christmas, birthday, or wedding presents. If I see it at a store, I tell the person standing next to me how great it is.

Whenever I meet chefs, it seems they have their potato-peeler equivalent. Sometimes it's a tool they use every day, the one they couldn't see cooking without. Other times it's a tool they pull out of a drawer, a cabinet, or haul in from the garage that, though they use it only occasionally, is perfect for the job.

I decided to poll some chefs to find out which tools they love to use and how they use them. Though many chefs use specific tools for presenting beautiful dishes in a way a home cook never would (Raji

Jallepalli, a Memphis chef, uses her meat slicer to make paper-thin slices of cucumbers and other vegetables for dishes like her green-tomato carpaccio (Napoleon), I set out to find the tricks and techniques that translate well for the home cook.

I began with a call to my friend Roland Passot, chef/owner of La Folie in San Francisco and Left Bank in Larkspur, California. When I asked which tool he uses most, his immediate reply was a mini food processor, actually a few of them, that he keeps around the kitchen to purée soups, emulsify sauces,

Look out potatoes—here comes David Page. The chef/owner of Home in New York City favors a simple wire masher for mashed potatoes with a "homey" texture.

and make mousses. He also relies on his Hamilton Beach blender when he wants a more refined texture—for his scallop mousse, for example.

All very interesting, but I wanted to hear about something less prosaic than a blender. So I asked the question another way. "Which is the tool that when you use it, you think 'Gee, I'm so glad someone invented this thing'?"

Passot had a quick answer for that one, too, only he didn't know what the thing was called. "It's a Japanese machine that I use to make potato strings," he says.

I happen to know what he's talking about because I look at kitchen catalogs as part of my job. You put a vegetable between a shaft and a blade, turn the handle, and presto! you've got spaghetti-like strands of carrot or ribbons of zucchini. Passot uses his to make potato

strings, which he wraps into coils around a wooden cylinder, deep-fries, and uses as an edible container for dishes like his *ragout* of sweetbreads. "It's a little gadget I use a lot," says Passot.

BLENDERS AND MORE BLENDERS

A call to Stephen Pyles, chef/owner of Star Canyon restaurant in Dallas and author of *The New Texas Cuisine* (Doubleday, 1993), got me worried. His two favorite tools? A blender and "that Japanese turning machine." Uh-oh. Was everyone going to give me the same two answers?

A blowtorch—used carefully—gives crème brûlée a perfect crust, says Jimmy Sneed, chef/owner of The Frog and the Redneck in Richmond, Virginia.



Pyles had a little story to go with his blender choice. On a trip to Mexico to research the process of making tamales, he watched women in a remote village spend days grinding and mixing ingredients in mortars and pestles. "I was told that the day they get electricity in town they were all going to buy blenders," recalls Pyles.

Why not a food processor? The blades on a food processor just can't reach the food like the blades in a blender, Pyles says. When he

teaches classes, he purées spinach in both machines. In the blender, the purée becomes a uniform dark green; in the food processor, the best he can get is a light green purée with bits of darker pieces in it.

As for the

Japanese slicer, Pyles began using it as a lark, cutting cucumbers into long strands for salads, "an 'isn't-this-cute?' kind of thing," he admits. Then he started making irresistibly light onion rings out of long loops of onion. "Now I couldn't live without it," he says.

Keeping in the south-of-the-border frame of mind, I spoke with Zarela Martinez, chef/owner of Zarela's in New York City. "I happen to have a lot of favorite tools," says Martinez. I was ready to hear about a blender and a Japanese spiral slicer. I was half right.

"For a lot of Mexican sauces, you have to have a blender," says Martinez, who's currently working on a cookbook about the foods of Oaxaca, home of Mexico's famous *mole* sauce. But the tool she uses most often is an electric coffee grinder, which she uses to grind her spices. "For most of my recipes, I like to grind the spices to order," says Martinez.

Freshly ground spices have a stronger aroma and flavor than those previously ground, and the electric grinder makes short work of the task. For the home cook, it's an affordable luxury; basic grinders cost about \$25.

Martinez' favorite gadget is a citrus squeezer. "I like to add acids such as lemon and lime juice to my dishes," she explains. The tart flavor of citrus enlivens her food and magnifies the other flavors in a dish.

Not juice, but zest was on the mind of Lucia Watson, chef/owner of Lucia's in Minneapolis. "I bet a day doesn't go by that I don't use my zester," says Watson of her can't-do-without tool. "I use zest in everything, from pastries to soup." The aromatic oils in the rinds of citrus fruits pack a lot of flavor. And though a knife or vegetable peeler can slice



He may not know what it's called, but Roland Passot, chef/owner of La Folie in San Francisco, loves his potato-string-making machine.

away the peel of a lime or a lemon, a zester ensures you only end up with the colored skin and not the bitter white pith.

Seattle chef Tom Douglas, owner of Dahlia Lounge, Palace Kitchen, and Etta's Seafood, also treasures his zester. "Too many people toss lemons and limes that have been squeezed but not zested," he laments. Yet his zester came in third behind a sausage stuffer and an ice crusher as favorite tools. After years of using a grinder attachment on a stand mixer, Douglas finally broke down and bought a real five-pound hand-crank sausage stuffer. "We can make a million pounds of sausage in no time," says Douglas. "Well, maybe not a million, but a lot." At about \$100, it's a tool the enthusiastic home chef might consider. Not so the ice crusher. Even Douglas admits the machine seemed extravagant at first. But now he likes the luxury of having crushed ice on hand to keep raw seafood cold and for presenting oysters on the half shell. And at Etta's they use it to make Sno-Cones, which are on the menu there.

Less gadget oriented is chef Gordon Hamersley. "I'm a pretty traditional person," says Hamersley,

chef/owner of Hamersley's Bistro in Boston, when I ask him to name his favorite gadget, "I really don't use 'em." Perhaps not surprisingly he named cast iron as what he wouldn't want to cook without. "The most versatile thing I ever bought was a 21-inch cast-iron pan, the biggest one they make," boasts Hamersley. "We do everything from roasting birds and vegetables to making polenta in it." Why cast iron? "It conducts heat in a great way. Once it gets hot, it stays hot with no hot spots."

Jimmy Sneed, chef/owner of The Frog and the Redneck in Richmond, Virginia, also likes cast iron for sautéing and insists it's the only kind of pan you can blacken fish in. "When I lecture about cooking, I emphasize that the most important thing about sautéing is sizzle. If it's not sizzling, it's stewing."

But cast iron wasn't Sneed's first pick for favorite tool. That honor goes to the \$400 ceramic-blade chef's knife he received as a gift. "It's very expensive and very cool," says Sneed of the razor-like blade that never needs sharpening. He doesn't use it at the restaurant, however, because he's afraid the brittle blade might get shattered amid the commotion in the kitchen.

Sneed does use a blowtorch—carefully—amid that commotion. He says it's vital for making *crème brûlée*. "A blowtorch plus turbinado sugar gives you a perfect crust," he explains. "You can't do without



*"It looks like a daddy-longlegs," says Barbara Tropp of her 99-cent steamer retriever. The author of *China Moon Cookbook* uses the metal claws to pick up hot items.*

either." Sneed also depends on—you guessed it—a blender: in this case, a Vita-Mix, a juicer/blender/grinder hybrid. "It's the only blender I've tried that I can put gravel in and it'll purée it," says Sneed.

Other chefs find hand-held immersion blenders more, well, handy. "They're great for making small batches of vinaigrettes and sauces," says Debra Ponzek, chef/owner of Aux Délices, a gourmet take-out store in Riverside, Connecticut. As they mix the ingredients, these little blenders aerate the liquid for a light texture. Another advantage is that you can mix in the bowl or saucepan you're using without dirtying another dish.

THE UNPLUGGED APPROACH

While many chefs like the convenience of electric blenders, slicers, and grinders, plenty more prefer the unplugged approach. David Page, chef/owner of Home in New York City, likes his wire potato masher best. "When I grew up, we had fork-mashed potatoes," explains Page. "I just like the texture you get using a potato masher."

Barbara Tropp, author of *The Modern Art of Chinese Cooking* (Morrow, 1982), likes her

"leaky ladle," a Chinese wire mesh basket that's "more leak than ladle" as opposed to Western slotted spoons, which she describes as "more spoon than slot." Leaky ladles pluck food from water or oil, retrieving just the food, not the liquid. And their light weight means "even a shrimp like me can handle them," says Tropp, who until recently was chef/owner of China Moon Cafe in San Francisco. "Any time a Western friend opens a restaurant, I offer a leaky ladle as a kitchen-warming gift."

Tropp also gives away another favorite gadget, a 99-cent steamer retriever, mostly to people who have never seen the odd-looking tool. "It looks like a daddy longlegs in death throes," says Tropp. Its retractable metal claws allow her to pick up hot bowls from steamer trays. It's also useful for retrieving artichokes and whole potatoes from a hot pan or oven.

Other low-tech items favored by chefs include a heatproof spatula, a jar lifter (for pickling), and a truffle slicer, which can also be used to shave Parmesan, and which Ponzek calls a "great little tool."

More humble are the empty aluminum cans Tim Keating uses as molds in the kitchen of the Omni Hotel in Houston, where he is chef de cuisine. Keating bakes his cinnamon, raisin, and walnut brioche in large cans; the round shape makes pretty slices for his renowned French toast. And he molds potato strings around small cans to deep-fry for edible containers.

Guess what he uses to make the potato strings?

Seattle chef Tom Douglas gets wrapped up in making sausages now that he has a real hand-crank sausage stuffer.



Recipes that put chefs' favorite tools to work

Tim Keating's "Tin Can" Fried Potatoes

At his restaurant, Keating molds potato strings around tin cans wrapped in plastic wrap before deep-frying them. Our version is a little less intimidating. Fill these crispy potato cylinders with vegetables, stews, or salads for an unusual presentation. Yields 6 to 8 rings.



Turn vegetables into delicate strings with a slicing machine to duplicate those "how-did-they-do-that?" restaurant plates.

Vegetable oil for frying 2 potatoes, made into strings using a Japanese slicer

In a deep, heavy-based pan, heat the oil to 365°F. Cut off both ends from an aluminum can. Fold a large piece of aluminum foil in half and then in half again. Wrap the foil around the can, crimping the foil under one edge to form a lip. Lightly grease the foil. Coil the potato strings around the foil-wrapped can until you've made a cylinder the height you want. Carefully slip the foil and potato ring off the can, being sure the foil keeps its shape. Using tongs, submerge the potatoes and foil into the hot oil. Cook until golden brown, about 2 min. Cool on a rack. Collapse the foil to release the potato ring.



Use a tin can as a mold for deep-fried potato rings. The foil gets slipped off the can just before frying.

Zarela Martinez' Yucatan Spice Mix

Grind spices with a coffee grinder to make this aromatic mix (adapted from Zarela's book, *Food from My Heart*) as a spice rub for meats to be grilled or roasted. Yields a scant 1/4 cup.

2 Tbs. black peppercorns
8 cloves
1 tsp. whole cumin seeds
1 tsp. whole coriander seeds
1/4 tsp. saffron (optional)
1 tsp. dried oregano, preferably Mexican
1/4 tsp. salt

In a heavy-based skillet over medium-high heat, toast the peppercorns, cloves, cumin, and coriander, shaking the pan often, until the spices' aromas are released, 1 to 2 min. Add the oregano, saffron, and salt and set aside to cool. Grind the mixture to a medium grind. Pat the mixture on the meat to coat it. Let the meat sit at room temperature for 20 min. before cooking it to allow the flavors to penetrate.



Freshly ground whole spices pack more flavor and aroma than preground spices, and they're a cinch to grind in a coffee grinder dedicated to the task.

Debra Ponzek's Provençal Purée

This cooked vinaigrette should sit for at least a few hours, preferably overnight, before its ingredients are blended. Try it with seared or grilled tuna or salmon or with grilled vegetables. Yields 1 1/2 cups.

1/2 cup extra-virgin olive oil
5 shallots
5 cloves garlic
1 large tomato, chopped
2 anchovy fillets
1/4 cup basil leaves
1/4 cup red-wine vinegar
Salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste

In a medium saucepan, heat the olive oil over medium heat. Add the shallots, garlic, tomato, anchovies, and basil. Simmer over low heat, until the shallots and garlic are tender, about 30 min. Add the vinegar and allow to cool. Cover and refrigerate for a few hours or overnight. Purée the ingredients with an immersion blender or in a regular blender. Season with salt and pepper. Cover and refrigerate for up to two days.



With an immersion blender, you can purée right in the saucepan, so there are fewer bowls to clean.

Joanne McAllister Smart is an associate editor for Fine Cooking. ♦

Making Classic Profiteroles with a Blackberry Twist

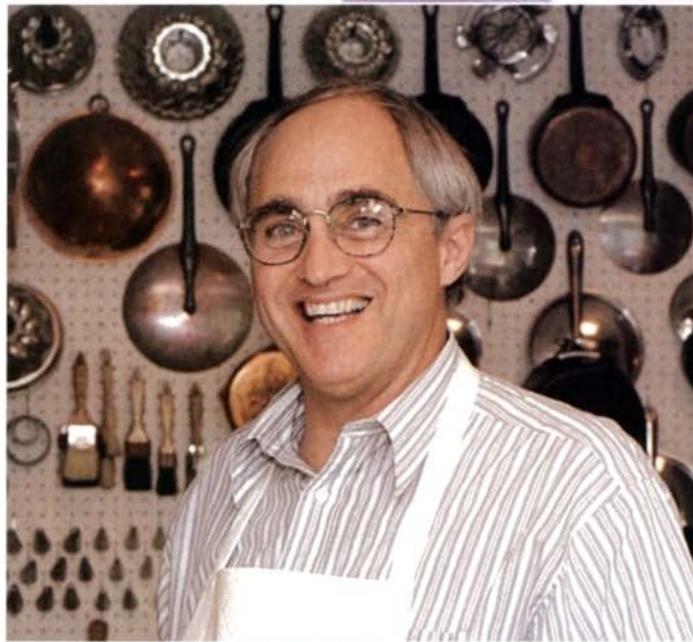
Drying the batter before adding eggs makes crisper puffs, and a chocolate lining adds a sweet surprise

BY BRUCE HEALY

I first encountered chocolate profiteroles as a graduate student in New York around 1970. I was just starting to get interested in French food—notably desserts—and these small cream puffs filled with vanilla ice cream and smothered in chocolate sauce were as ubiquitous on French restaurant menus back then as *mousse au chocolat*. While dessert trends have since changed, the idea of crisp, delicate pastry shells filled with smooth, cold ice cream still has an irresistible appeal, and I recently decided to revitalize this classic dessert with a pair of modern twists.

First, the sauce: A sauce made from puréed blackberries works perfectly here because, like the original chocolate sauce, it gives you a deep, rich color to contrast with the ice cream, and it offers the vivid, luscious taste of fruit. While blackberries were once one of the ephemeral treats of summer, fresh blackberries now come to market most of the year, and excellent frozen blackberries are always available.

Second, the profiteroles (pronounced proh-FOOT-eh-rolls) themselves: I realized that by glazing the interior with chocolate, I could protect them from the melting ice cream that in the original version had a tendency to make the pastry soggy. This simple trick allowed me to keep some chocolate flavor in the dessert, but to reduce its role to a more subtle accent. As a bonus, the chocolate gets hard from



Author Bruce Healy keeps his baking tools organized on a pegboard wall

contact with the ice cream and provides a pleasing little crunch to each bite.

FOR PERFECT PUFFS, MEASURE PRECISELY

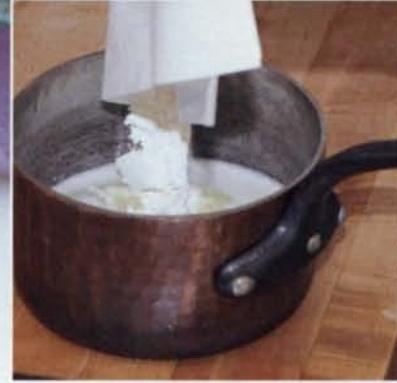
The key element in making this dessert is, of course, the little cream puff—without it, we would have merely a delicious blackberry sundae. Profiteroles, like all other pastries in the cream-puff and éclair family, are made from a batter called *pâte à choux*



Mix the basic dough and beat over heat for better puffs



Combine the water, butter, sugar, and salt in a 1-quart saucepan and bring it to a boil over high heat, stirring occasionally to melt the butter.



Off the heat, add the sifted flour all at once; stir with a wooden spatula until the ingredients form a mass in the pan's center—this is the parade.



Return the parade to medium-high heat and beat constantly for about 30 seconds. It should feel dry but slightly buttery, with a matte surface.

Add just enough egg to make a soft and glossy batter

Transfer the panade to a bowl to stop the cooking. Mix in two eggs all at once, stirring with a wooden spatula. Start slowly and then gradually beat more vigorously as the eggs mix with the panade.



When the batter is smooth, stir in the beaten third egg a little at a time until the batter is soft and glossy and begins to flow slowly off the spatula when lifted.

The batter has the right consistency when it sticks to your finger, pulling up in a string from the rest of the batter. Don't add any more egg at this point.



Pipe the batter into evenly

Mark the baking sheets with 1 1/4-inch circles, evenly spaced at least 1 inch apart. To do this, dip a cookie cutter or an inverted pastry tube in flour and tap it on the baking sheet.



(pronounced paht ah SHOO). The magic of *pâte à choux* is that a lump of heavy batter bakes to a light, crisp, hollow shell—totally different from the flaky texture of a buttery pastry dough. Of course, like all magic, this trick is really accomplished by a systematic sleight of hand.

The choux batter is actually just a paste of flour, water, and butter moistened with eggs. The paste, called a *panade*, is begun by heating water and butter, along with a little salt and sugar, until the butter melts. One of the wonders of *pâte à choux* is how such a small quantity of ingredients ($\frac{1}{2}$ cup water, $3\frac{1}{2}$ tablespoons butter, $\frac{1}{2}$ cup flour) bakes up to make enough for eight desserts, but working with small quantities means being extra careful with timing and technique. To avoid problems, I cut the butter into small pieces before adding it to the water and stir occasionally as it heats so that it melts as soon as the water reaches a boil; otherwise, too much water might evaporate, thereby altering the proportions of the *panade*.

Next I add the flour all at once, off the heat, beating vigorously with a wooden spatula. The warmth of the water causes the starch in the flour to swell instantly and absorb all the water. This traps the water inside the dough so that it can later turn to steam and cause the profiteroles to puff up when they're baked. Vigorous beating creates an elastic dough, strong enough to hold the puffed shape when baked.

The drier the panade, the more egg it will absorb, and the lighter the profiteroles will be. I return the *panade* to the burner and stir vigorously for about 30 seconds until it feels slightly drier and has

shaped domes for high rising puffs



Scoop the batter into a pastry bag fitted with a $\frac{3}{8}$ -inch plain pastry tube (Ateco 5). Hold the bag at a 60-degree angle from the baking sheet and set the tip of the pastry tube on the sheet. Press on the pastry bag until the batter begins to spread around the tip of the tube. Then slowly raise the tip of the tube straight up, continuing to press evenly on the bag, until the batter has spread around the tip.



Release the pressure on the pastry bag and finish the dome with a quick semicircular flick of the pastry tube. The tube's tip should move across the surface of the batter, severing the connection between the batter on the baking sheet and the batter in the tube.



Dip a pastry brush in the remaining beaten egg (add more egg if you need it) and gently pat the top of each dome with this egg wash to moisten its surface lightly. Don't let the egg wash drip onto the baking sheet or it will make the pastries stick.

the batter will slide around on the sheet as you try to pipe it. Too little and the puffs may stick after baking. Seasoned black steel baking sheets (the best) or nonstick baking sheets don't need any greasing. For all others, I use a paper towel to coat the surface very lightly with melted butter. Avoid air-cushioned baking sheets altogether. When baking profiteroles, you want the heat from the bottom, and the air pocket in this type of baking sheet diffuses that heat. For the same reason, choux should not be baked in a convection oven because there's no bottom heat.

Pipe profiteroles in small domes. The key to a shapely puff is handling the pastry bag carefully. I set

PIPE THE BATTER FOR GREAT SHAPE

Choux batter is easiest to pipe out on a baking sheet with a light film of butter. If there's too much grease,

Bake until the puffs are crisp and dry—be sure to test



Heat the oven to 400°F. Bake the puffs, using a wooden spoon to hold the oven door ajar about 1½ inches, until the batter puffs up and turns a medium golden brown and the profiteroles are firm, dry, and crisp, 35 to 45 minutes.



Open one up to test it. If the inside is still soft, the puffs need more baking. If the bottoms of the puffs look like they're browning too much, reduce the oven temperature to 350°F.



When the profiteroles are done, cool the baking sheet on a wire rack. Then slide the pastries off the baking sheet with a metal spatula.

the tip directly on the baking sheet and press on the bag until the batter spreads around the tip. I gradually raise the tip until I reach the size I want. While I'm piping these little puffs, I imagine myself inflating them as I go with my pastry tip inserted in the middle of each little dome.

Bake only one sheet at a time. Pipe out only as much as you can bake at one time (one baking sheet if you only have one oven) and lightly brush the tops of the domes with beaten egg. Don't let the egg drip onto the sheet or it will make the pastries stick. As soon as possible, pipe and bake the remaining batter.

LEAVE THE DOOR AJAR TO LET STEAM ESCAPE

Choux batter is not aerated—the eggs haven't been whipped, there's no baking powder, and the water has even been boiled to eliminate any tiny air bubbles—so there are no small air cells to inflate when the batter bakes. As a result, the steam that does occur collects in a small number of pockets and eventually, if all goes well, into a single large pocket. As this occurs, the batter puffs outward like a balloon and then dries to form a crisp, hollow shell.

Since profiteroles release a lot of steam as they bake, keeping the oven door open a crack (about 1½ inches) will vent this moisture and give you crisp, dry shells. This also prevents heat from building up at the top of the oven so that the profiteroles have time to rise before the outside surface of the batter sets—puffing up first and then gradually turning brown as they become dry and crisp. Getting them crisp takes longer than most cookbooks care to admit—at least 35 to 40 minutes. While an underdone

profiterole may have a golden-brown exterior, its sodden, eggy interior will compromise the entire dessert. I test them for doneness by taking one out of the oven, letting it cool briefly, and then slicing it open. If it is still soft and moist inside, I let the rest of the profiteroles continue baking. If they start browning too much on the bottoms, reduce the oven heat.

PUT THE PIECES TOGETHER

I manage my time by making the blackberry sauce in advance (it keeps for up to three days in the refrigerator) and making the *pâte à choux* the morning of the day I plan to serve the dessert, since it's really best eaten the day it's made. Then a few hours before

Blackberries and orange juice



Combine the blackberries, sugar, and orange juice in a blender and process until the berries are puréed.

Line the puffs with chocolate and assemble the dessert



Cut each profiterole in half horizontally using a wavy-edge bread knife. Pull out any soft channels with your fingers to make it easier to glaze the insides with chocolate. Lay out both tops and bottoms, cut sides up, on a tray. Brush the insides of both tops and bottoms of the profiteroles with melted chocolate, using a small pastry brush to coat them evenly. Let the chocolate set. If your kitchen is warm (over 70°F), refrigerate the tray of profiteroles for 5 or 10 minutes to set the chocolate quickly.



Just before serving, scoop a small ball of ice cream onto the bottom of each profiterole. Set the top half of the profiterole on the ice cream ball and press gently.

dessert, I cut each profiterole in half, coat the insides evenly with melted chocolate, and let the chocolate set. If your kitchen is warm (over 70°F), refrigerate the tray of profiteroles for 5 or 10 minutes to set the chocolate quickly, but don't leave the profiteroles longer since condensation would soften them.

Right before serving, fill the pastries with ice cream. I like working with a small ice-cream scoop, but a pair of spoons will also work. Work quickly so that the ice cream doesn't melt. If this happens, I briefly put the filled profiteroles in the freezer until they firm up. Don't leave the filled pastries in the freezer for too long or their wonderful, dry pastry will lose its appeal.

My favorite part of this whole dessert is pouring a luxuriant cascade of thick blackberry sauce over neat pyramids of filled profiteroles and carrying the plates to the table.

Chocolate-Lined Profiteroles with Blackberry Sauce

Superfine sugar dissolves almost instantly in the puréed blackberries. If it's unavailable, use granulated sugar. Amounts of flour and butter are listed by weight (ounces) and by volume (cups or tablespoons); use either measurement. Yields about 32 to 35 profiteroles and 1½ cups sauce; serves eight.

FOR THE CHOUX:

½ cup water
2 oz. (4 Tbs.) unsalted butter, cut into ½-inch pieces
1 tsp. sugar
¼ tsp. salt
2½ oz. (½ cup plus 2 tsp.) all-purpose flour, sifted
2 large eggs
1 large egg, lightly beaten

FOR THE BLACKBERRY SAUCE:

1 lb. fresh blackberries or thawed unsweetened frozen berries
½ cup superfine sugar; more to taste if berries are especially tart
¼ cup fresh orange juice

FOR FILLING AND SERVING:

4½ oz. Lindt Surfin bittersweet chocolate or other top-quality European chocolate, chopped and barely melted
1¼ pt. (approximately) vanilla ice cream, very firm and cold

For the procedure, follow the photos starting on p. 67.



Arrange four filled profiteroles per plate in a pyramid. Spoon about ¼ cup blackberry sauce over the profiteroles and serve immediately.

Strain through a sieve to eliminate the seeds, pressing with a rubber spatula to extract as much of the pulp as possible. Discard the seeds. Stir the sauce to make it homogeneous. The sauce can be stored in the refrigerator, tightly covered, for up to three days. It should be just thick enough to bridge the tines of a fork. If it's too thick, add a few drops of orange juice or water.



Bruce Healy is the author of *Mastering the Art of French Pastry* (Barrons, 1984) and *The French Cookie Book* (Morrow, 1994). He teaches classes in French pastry across the country. ♦

Creaming butter and sugar for finer texture in baked goods

Next time you enjoy a tender, fine-crumb pound cake or a rich, delicate butter cookie, thank the baker for taking the time to cream the butter and sugar properly.

Batters too dense to be leavened solely by eggs or chemical leavens (like baking soda) depend on air that's incorporated into creamed butter and sugar to help them rise. Shortcut this step and your baked goods will likely be disappointingly dense and coarse.

Have the butter at room temperature. Butter that's too cold won't blend with the sugar. If it's too warm, the butter will be greasy and won't

hold air. The ideal temperature is around 70°F. The butter should be somewhat firm but soft enough that you can easily sink a fingertip into it.

A flat wooden spoon is the best tool for creaming. Although whisks, electric mixers, and metal or plastic spoons can all do the job, the texture of wood is most effective for creaming butter. Wood's rough surface holds the butter and keeps it from sliding around the bowl. Electric mixers are practical for large quantities of batter, but you risk overheating the butter.

CREAMING BUTTER REQUIRES ELBOW GREASE

Begin by flattening the butter against the side of the bowl. After a few strokes, the butter should give way and become malleable. Once the butter is creamy, start to incorporate air by working with larger motions, lifting the butter and folding it over onto itself. After a minute or two, the butter will be fluffy and light.

Continue beating and gradually add the sugar. The sharp-edged sugar cry-



Mash the room-temperature butter against the sides of the mixing bowl until it begins to turn creamy.



Sprinkle sugar slowly into the softened butter and beat vigorously until all the sugar is blended.



The creamed butter and sugar should be almost doubled in volume, fluffy, and light.

tals contribute to the airiness of creamed butter by cutting into the fat and forming tiny air bubbles. After three to five minutes of vigorous beating, the butter and sugar should be pale and almost doubled in volume.

If the butter gets too warm or you beat it too long, the mixture will become grainy and look somewhat curdled. There's no harm in using the butter at this point, but it won't have the same leavening power as properly creamed butter would.

Don't deflate the batter as you add other ingredients. Lightly beat the eggs before adding them and carefully fold in the dry ingredients to avoid spending too much time or using too much force when adding these ingredients.

Using dried mushrooms

The availability of woodland mushrooms is limited by the seasons and the whims of nature, but when dried, these mushrooms become a pantry staple available to cooks year-round. Drying concentrates a mushroom's character, making it taste more intensely of the earth and woods where it was born.

Porcini—also known as cèpes—and morels are two of the most common dried wild mushrooms. Shiitakes, which are cultivated, are also commonly dried. Whatever type of dried mushroom you buy, look for bags of whole caps with little dust or broken pieces. Shake the bag and if any of the dust has legs, don't

buy it—dried mushrooms can harbor insects. The darker the mushroom, the more robust the flavor; pale ones will be more subtle.

Soak dried mushrooms to release their flavor. Begin by quickly rinsing the mushrooms to get rid of any sand or grit. Then put them in a bowl with just enough warm water to cover. For more flavor, use warm stock or add a splash or two of fortified wine, such as sherry or Madeira. Don't use more liquid than you need or its flavor will be diluted.

Most mushrooms will take 20 to 40 minutes to become soft and pliable. Hotter water



A warm soak in water or stock softens dried mushrooms and releases flavor into the liquid.



Strain the soaking liquid after lifting out the mushrooms, and use the fragrant liquid in your recipe.

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will speed things up, but a longer, cooler soak will give the maximum flavor infusion. Some mushrooms expand more than others, and if you find that they have soaked up all the liquid before becoming soft, simply add a bit more warm water.

Once softened, lift the mushrooms out of the soaking liquid so you don't disturb any of the grit that has settled to the bottom of the bowl. Gently squeeze the mushrooms to release any excess liquid, and reserve the soaking liquid. Feel the mushrooms for any hard or woody parts that must be cut off and discarded. For example, shiitake stems will need to be removed, as well as the base of other mushrooms that may remain hard. Once softened, the mushrooms may be sliced, chopped, or left whole, according to your recipe.

Add reconstituted mushrooms at the beginning of cooking. This allows their highly concentrated flavors to permeate the entire dish.

The mushroom's soaking liquid is full of flavor. Strain it first through a fine sieve lined with a double layer of cheesecloth or a damp coffee filter. Or, if the mushrooms weren't terribly dirty, you can let the liquid settle and simply pour it off, leaving any sediment behind.

Dried mushrooms are best used as a seasoning, like an herb or spice, rather than as a vegetable in their own right. They bring a meaty accent to vegetarian fare and a remarkable depth and complexity to poultry, game, and beef.

Store dried mushrooms in a cool, dark place for up to six months. Alternatively, keep them in a sealed bag in the freezer and they'll last indefinitely.

Coating food for a golden, crisp crust

The subtle dusting of flour on a sautéed fillet of sole or the crisp breadcrumb crust on a fried veal cutlet are among those culinary details that separate the simply good from the delicious. Coatings, whether they're made of flour, crumbs, nuts, or grated cheese, protect food from the heat of cooking, keeping it moist and tender. At the same time, coatings brown evenly, making a crisp contrast to the softer food within. Foods to be coated should first be patted dry. You can season the food directly with salt and pepper, or season the coating.

A light dusting of flour is the simplest coating. Called *à la meunière* (pronounced moon-YARE) or dredging, this technique allows flour to form a thin, golden crust. The light coating of flour doesn't interfere with the flavor of the food, but absorbs any moisture from the food that would otherwise make steam and prevent even browning.

A crumb coating provides a contrast in texture. The best crumb coatings are thinly and evenly applied in three steps. With the exception of starchy foods like croquettes that have flour or crumbs as an ingredient, the first step is to dredge the food in flour. This seals in moisture and gives the slippery egg wash something to stick to. Then dip the floured food into a bowl of beaten egg before rolling it in the crumbs. A tablespoon of water or milk thins the egg so the coating doesn't become too thick, while a tablespoon of oil makes a richer, more tender coating.



Roll in flour and shake off the excess. A pie plate works best for delicate foods like fish fillets; sturdier foods like drumsticks can be tossed with flour in a paper or plastic bag.



Dip floured food in egg wash. Let any excess egg drain from the food. Using one hand for flour and the other for egg keeps your fingers from becoming as breaded as the food.



Put the food in a bowl of crumbs and toss more crumbs on top. Press firmly so the coating adheres and turn the food to make an even, unbroken covering. Refrigerate the breaded food on a plate or wire rack for 20 minutes before cooking so the coating sets up slightly.

Fine fresh breadcrumbs make the lightest crust. Larger crumbs cook up crispier but absorb more fat. Meal coatings, such as cornmeal, cracker meal, cereal, and dried breadcrumbs, make a sturdy, crisp crust that absorbs little fat. Ingredients such as grated cheese and ground nuts are delicious additions; just avoid any moist ingredients. For example, cheese should be dry enough to grate very fine; aged Parmesan is a good choice.

Herbs and spices boost the flavor of bread coatings. In addition to salt and pepper,

add a bit of rosemary, thyme, sage, or more assertive spices, such as cumin, saffron, or ginger, to any of the three steps. Mixing seasonings into the egg wash is a good way to ensure that they're evenly distributed.

Let the coating set. Refrigerate breaded food on a plate or wire rack for 20 minutes before cooking; this will allow the coating to firm up and adhere better as it cooks. Don't stack breaded food, and don't let it sit too long before cooking or it will become soggy.

Molly Stevens is a contributing editor to Fine Cooking. ♦



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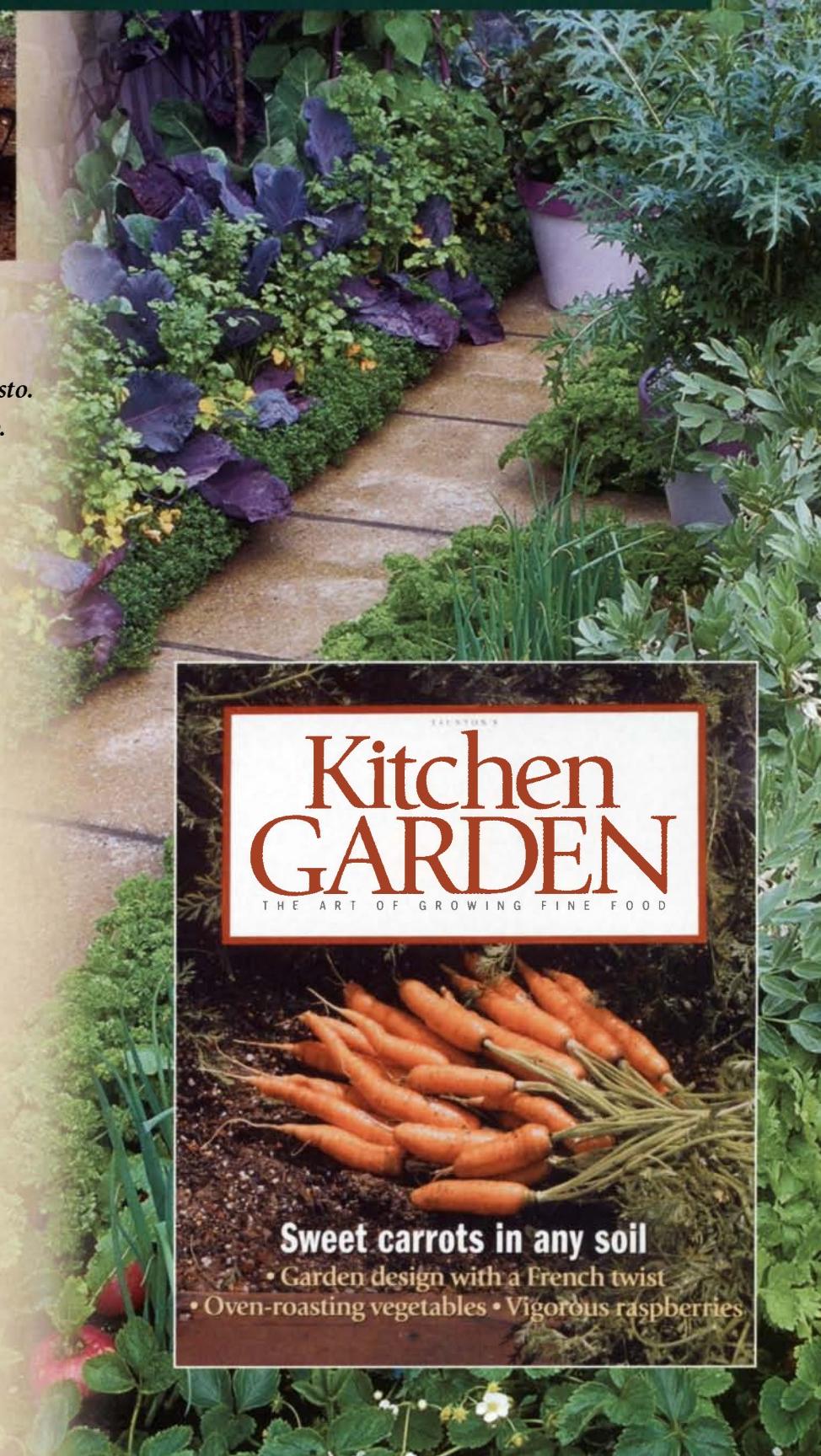
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MSG Enhances Flavors Naturally

Parmesan cheese, tomatoes, spinach, and mushrooms have something interesting in common besides being great partners for pasta—they all contain significant amounts of glutamate, the flavor substance in monosodium glutamate, or MSG. Over the last few decades, much attention has been paid to the controversy over whether MSG causes “Chinese restaurant syndrome” (CRS), an array of symptoms from burning sensations to chest pains. But not many people know that MSG is a naturally occurring substance in many raw ingredients and has been used for centuries as a flavor enhancer.

TRADITIONAL CUISINES PRIZED MSG’S POWERS

Asian cooks traditionally made stocks with a seaweed high in MSG to add richness of flavor to foods. In 1908, a Japanese scientist identified the substance, and since then MSG has been produced specifically as a food additive.

Some MSG exists as MSG naturally, and some comes from the breakdown of proteins during natural processes like digestion and fermentation. The proteins release glutamic acid, an amino acid that’s found in virtually all proteins. The acid instantly reacts and becomes a salt, which when dissolved in liquid breaks into two parts, a metal portion and a glutamate portion. It’s the glutamate portion of the salt that’s responsible for

flavor-enhancing characteristics. The term glutamate is frequently used interchangeably with MSG.

You can buy MSG under brand names like McCormick’s Flavor Enhancer, Accent, or Ajinomoto. Many processed foods contain MSG, often from sources such as hydrolyzed vegetable protein, sodium caseinate, or yeast extract. In the U.S., added MSG must be listed on the label, but if the MSG is part of another ingredient, it doesn’t need to be listed specifically, according to current rules.

No one can say exactly what MSG really does. It has been described as supplying “mouth satisfaction,” increasing “total taste intensity of food.” Sensory physiologists

Foods relatively high in glutamate include soy sauce, Parmesan, eggs, tomatoes, mushrooms, and, of course, seasonings like Accent.



MSG, despite the fact that in many countries, double-blind study after study found no association of symptoms with even more than the amount of MSG found in a typical Chinese restaurant meal (3g). A few participants in the studies had reactions, but those not getting MSG had as many and in several

The FDA affirms that MSG is safe for most people when eaten at customary levels.

suggest that MSG may be even more than a taste enhancer. It may provide what the Japanese call *umami* (roughly translated as “tastiness”), a fifth basic taste in addition to sweet, sour, salty, and bitter.

STUDIES FIND MSG SAFE, BUT SOME STILL WARY

Many consumers have a “no thank you” attitude toward

studies even more reactions than those getting MSG.

A very small fraction of the population, however, may be hypersensitive. Research finds that the dose required to cause any reaction varies greatly from person to person. Several researchers have linked CRS with vitamin B₆ deficiency.

To make it even more confusing to sort out the CRS

mystery, there’s a common bacterium (*Bacillus cereus*) that multiplies rapidly on cooked rice left at room temperature and can cause mild food poisoning. Some cases of CRS attributed to MSG may have been caused by the bacteria.

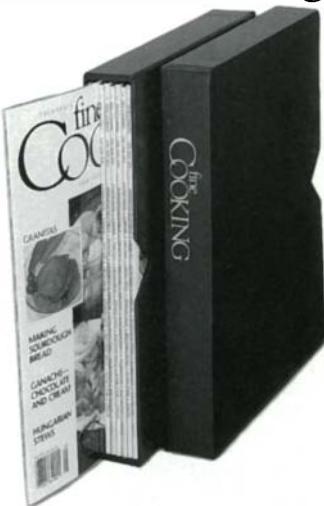
In the U.S., the American Medical Association, the Food and Drug Administration, and the Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology all affirm that MSG is safe for most people when eaten at customary levels, and international bodies—the European Economic Community, the United Nations, and the World Health Organization—take the same stand.

In spite of its widespread natural occurrence and its general acceptance as a safe food additive, there are anti-MSG activists such as the NOMSG Consumer Group.

Research continues into the role glutamates play in human metabolism, especially as a neurotransmitter—there is evidence that glutamic acid is responsible for 75% of the excitatory transmission in the brain. Undoubtedly, we will eventually have a greater understanding of how dietary intake of amino acids affects us.

Shirley O. Corriher, a contributing editor to Fine Cooking, teaches across the country. Her book, *CookWise*, is being published by Morrow in August. ♦

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Flower Waters Add Flavor and Aroma to Foods

I was first introduced to flower water by a Lebanese friend who, feeling a little homesick, prepared an authentic Arabic dinner. When the lamb meatballs arrived at the table, she sprinkled orange-flower water over the hot platter. The rising steam carried a floral scent that was at once comforting and mysterious.

Since then, I've been experimenting with flower waters in my own cooking. I've found they add an intriguing layer of flavor and fragrance to both sweet and savory foods.

FLOWER WATERS SCENT SWEETS AND STEWS

Flower water generally comes in two varieties. Orange-flower water is distilled from

pastry doughs, sponge cakes, and candies.

Flower waters are potent, so use them sparingly. Used properly, they should only hint at their origins, not announce them. On a dish that needs no further cooking, sprinkle a few drops. When you add the flavoring during cooking, use a bit more; just add it to the recipe as you would vanilla extract.

Find flower waters at specialty food stores.

Look for Monteux from France, in a cobalt blue bottle, or Cortas from Lebanon. I like rose waters from both countries, but I prefer the orange-flower water

Rose water is best in sweets; orange-flower water works in all foods.

orange blossoms; rose water, from rosebuds.

Used in cooking since the Middle Ages, flower water is found in Moroccan salads and in stews called *tagines*, as well as in Turkish delight, a Middle Eastern sweet. It appears in traditional French treats such as Christmas bread (*pompe de Noël*) and Candlemas cookies (*navettes de Saint-Victor*). I've also enjoyed it in crêpe batters,

from France: it's made entirely with bitter orange blossoms, which give a more distinctive aroma. The Lebanese mixture of sweet and bitter blossoms is less potent. Stored tightly capped in a cool, dark place, flower water keeps for a year.

Elaine Sterling is a chef, cooking instructor, and restaurant consultant who lives in New York City. ♦

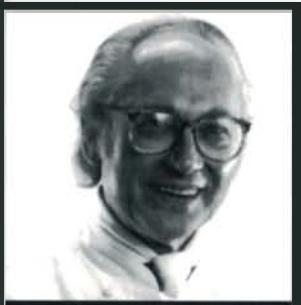


Flower waters perfume drinks, savories, and sweets.

EXPERIMENT WITH FLOWER WATERS

- ◆ Use orange-flower water to brighten dishes that already have a hint of orange. Try a few drops in a pilaf or stew with dried fruits, or in a glaze for duck or ham.
- ◆ Substitute rose or orange-flower water for vanilla extract in desserts. Either is delicious in *crème brûlée*, pound cake, poppy seed cake, and ice cream.
- ◆ Sprinkle flower water over fresh fruit. It's especially good on orange slices and pomegranate seeds.
- ◆ Add aroma to mineral water with a few drops of flower water. Add orange-flower water to lemonade, or try rose water in pink lemonade.
- ◆ Perfume mixed drinks with flower water. Try orange-flower water in orange-juice-based cocktails like mimosas. Rose water adds aroma to vodka martinis.
- ◆ Promote a soothing feeling with flower water. In Morocco, flower water is sprinkled around dining areas to create a relaxing ambiance, and French women of the 19th century used it to calm their cranky babies.

*Malcolm Forbes, Rostropovich,
Bob Hope and Princess Margaret
have all personally thanked him.*



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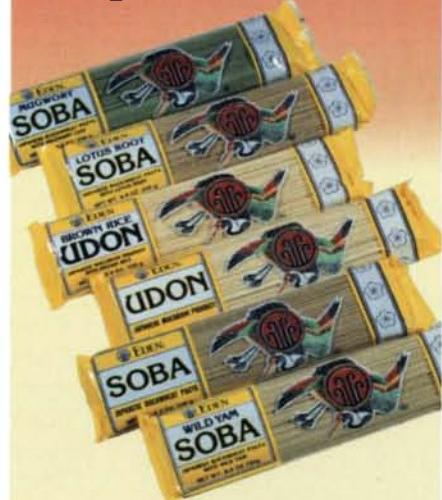
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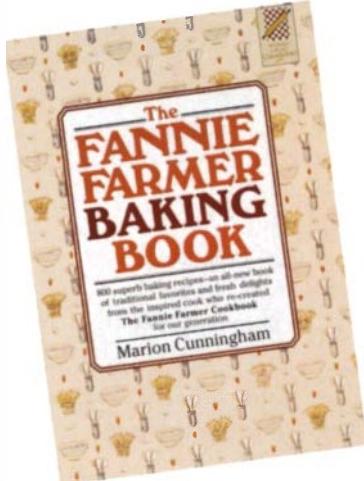
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Four Cookbooks that Celebrate American Baking Today

Writing a timeless baking cookbook isn't easy. In the past, our grandmothers and aunts needed little more than a terse reference book with lots of recipes. Today, readers who are at once more sophisticated and yet less experienced expect much more. Beginners want



Marion Cunningham's recipes include chiffon pie and Parker House rolls—reminders of how good traditional American baking can be.

explicit instructions for never-fail recipes. More advanced bakers want new, unusual, professional-level recipes to challenge their skills and show off their good taste. Armchair bakers want dazzling photographs and entertaining prose. And then there are bakers like me, with years of experience, who are always in search of the well-written recipe. No wonder I turned up so few candidates in the initial search for this review. But my scouring paid off, because each of the

four books reviewed here is indispensable to home bakers.

Marion Cunningham has written the current category killer, *The Fannie Farmer Baking Book*. Contrary to the impression left by this weighty book's title, Cunningham's book is completely original—written in the spirit of Fanny Farmer. By creating this book, Cunningham hoped to lure more people back into their

mel Chiffon Cake frosted with Seven-Minute Caramel Frosting exemplify the typically American offerings. Many recipes are simple and take less than an hour to make. Cunningham has made an effort to keep ingredient lists short and to offer less expensive alternatives for costly ingredients. Despite the vastness of this collection, it's obvious that Cunningham

These books beckon us to the kitchen with the reassuring promise of crusty bread and sweet sticky buns.

kitchens to revive a dying tradition. The 800 recipes detail all types of baked goods, including pies, cakes, yeast breads, and quick breads, celebrating the joys and comforts of American home baking.

Cunningham starts each baking category with a hand-holding "Basic Master Recipe," to painstakingly guide beginners through each skill. The recipes following offer much more abbreviated instructions for advanced bakers. Cunningham's reassuring prose, refreshingly devoid of ego, introduces each recipe and sets a relaxed tone.

The recipes themselves are the best part of the book. Schrafft's Butterscotch Cookies are wonderfully chewy, with a rich butterscotch flavor. Black Bottom Pie and Cara-

worried over every recipe until it was perfect—there are simply no duds.

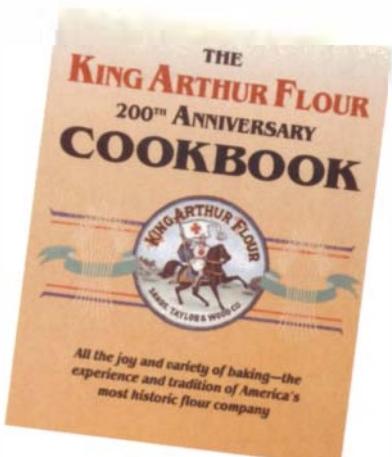
Brinna Sands' *King Arthur Flour 200th Anniversary Cookbook* is another baking classic with a definite prejudice towards simple home baking. While undoubtedly conceived to help sell King Arthur flour, this cookbook is nevertheless a superb baking compendium. In 600 pages, Sands exhaustively covers all types of home baking with a friendly voice that sounds as if an old friend were sharing her favorite recipes with you. In fact, many of the recipes originated with the Sands' family, friends, and coworkers.

Sands seems truly eager to teach and to be thorough. Much like *The Fannie Farmer Baking Book*, each baking cat-

egory begins with a detailed "Primer" for novices. Her Pie Crust Primer is a good case study: Directions, including alternatives, various techniques, and ingredients, run for ten pages. Over 12 more pie crusts follow, ranging from a "Never-Fail" mix-in-the-pan oil crust to an elegant cream-and-butter quasi puff pastry.

While not a strictly regional cookbook, here and there a taste of New England comes through (King Arthur Flour is based in Vermont). Crumble Station Blueberry Muffins cradle tiny wild Maine blueberries, and Northern Butternut Maple Pie is crusted with wild butternuts. Other recipes offer good, straightforward home bakery such as Chocolate Pudding Cake, Scottish Scones, and a lemon-bar-like Lemon Pie that my family really enjoyed.

Indisputably regional, Bill Neal's *Biscuits, Spoon-*



Brinna Sands' 600-page book gives reassurance and recipes for everything from pie crust to popovers.

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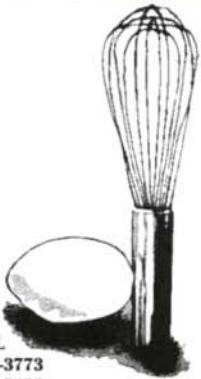
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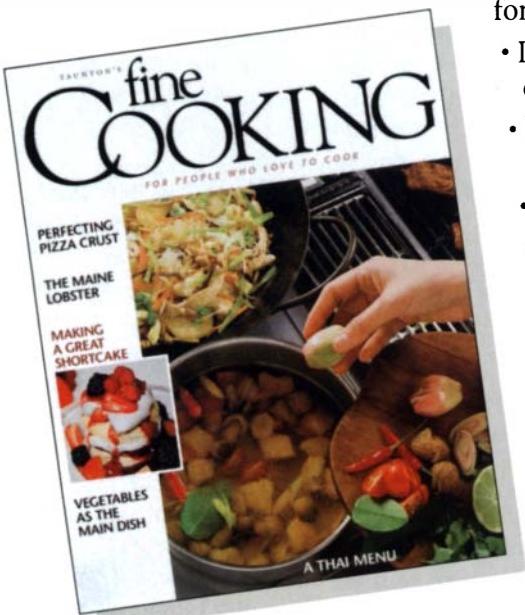
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bread, and Sweet Potato Pie is nevertheless universally appealing. Neal uses baking as a vehicle to explore his southern heritage—food lore and historic recipes are stirred into a wide representation of classic southern bakery, producing a great baking book that also happens to be a great read.

Neal casts his net wide to define southern baking. Native American Awendaw (a kind of spoonbread), tea room Moss Rose Cake, Low Country Philip (a savory rice cake), and African-American Pinto Bean Cake exemplify his plentiful haul. That every recipe works and tastes wonderful is a testament to Neal's skill and palate. I baked the intriguing Osgood Pie and loved the combination of brandy, butter, sugar, pecans, and apples.

Neal introduces various sections and recipes with well-researched historic background, and old photographs document now-vanished ways of food preparation and food-centered gatherings. He liberally quotes from old cookbooks, manuscripts, letters, and even old newspaper accounts to place recipes within a historic framework. Clearly Neal also appreciated history in the making, as he also recounts warm stories of baking

with his four children and in his restaurants.

For bakers seeking professional-style recipes and a little celebrity glitz, Dorie Greenspan's ambitious *Baking with Julia*, the companion to Julia Child's PBS series, is the only book in this review that concentrates on the artisan baking craze. Recently, several excellent single-subject books about breads, cakes, and cookies have been published, yet this is the first to combine all the disciplines into one volume.

More than 25 bakers contributed recipes, including some of the country's best, such as Flo Braker, Nick Malgieri, Marion Cunningham, Nancy Silverton, and Alice Medrich. Most of the bakers are professionals, and Greenspan, herself the author of dessert and breakfast cookbooks, has made a diligent effort to translate their formulas into working recipes.

The book offers a broad selection of cakes, breads, quick breads, and pastries, such as one would find in a good artisan bakery; few recipes are ones you would typically find in a cookbook for home bakers. Surely the book's best feature is its gorgeous photographs, offering plenty of mouthwatering views for armchair bakers and useful clarifi-

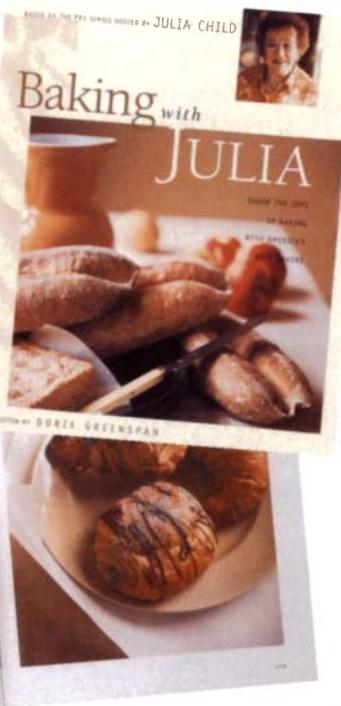
cation of complicated steps for beginners.

Some really worthy jewels are scattered between the book's covers. Flo Braker's Vanilla Pound Cake was one of the best I've ever made—my very picky family was just blown away by its fine texture. Nick Malgieri's X Cookies are stunning and unique.

However, the book's price (\$40), the publicity surrounding it, and its competition with those single-subject baking books compel close scrutiny. For the most part, the book weathers well, but there are more than a few

polished. Nevertheless, it's a splendid-looking volume, with inspiration to spare for even the most jaded baker.

Maggie Glezer is a baker from Atlanta and the author of "Baking French Bread at Home" in Fine Cooking #19. ♦



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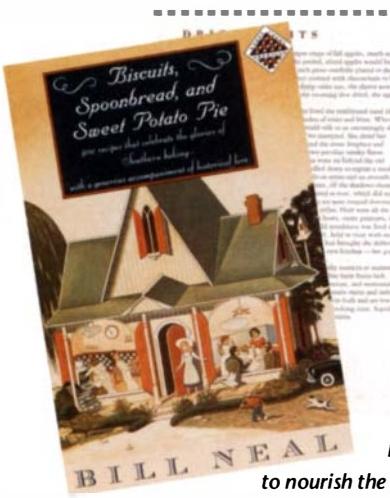
PUBLISHING INFORMATION

The Fanny Farmer Baking Book, by Marion Cunningham. Wing Books, Knopf, 1984. \$12.99, hardcover; 624 pp. ISBN 0-517-14829-3.

The King Arthur Flour 200th Anniversary Cookbook, by Brinna B. Sands. Countryman Press, 1992. \$24, softcover; 616 pp. ISBN 0-88150-247-2.

Biscuits, Spoonbread, and Sweet Potato Pie, by Bill Neal. Knopf, 1996. \$18, softcover; 335 pp. ISBN 0-679-76580-8.

Baking with Julia, by Dorie Greenspan. William Morrow, 1996. \$40, hardcover; 481 pp. ISBN 0-688-14657-0.



Bill Neal's baking book offers "foods to nourish the heart and soul as well as the body."

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Send event announcements

to Calendar, *Fine Cooking*,

PO Box 5506, Newtown,

CT 06470-5506, or via

e-mail: fc@taunton.com.

Include dates, a complete

address, and the phone

number for more

information. Listings are

free, but restricted to

events of direct interest

to cooks. The deadline for

entries in the August/

September issue is May 1.



CALIFORNIA

12th Annual Stockton

Asparagus Festival—Oak Grove Regional Park. More than 100,000 visitors converge on Stockton each year to honor this beloved spring vegetable. The feast includes deep-fried asparagus, asparagus pasta, asparagus bisque, asparaberry-shortcake ice cream, asparagus nachos with asparagus salsa, asparagus beef sandwiches, and asparaburritos, washed down with the region's best micro and specialty beers and wine. April 25–27. Call the San Joaquin Convention & Visitors Bureau at 800/350-1987, or visit the festival's home page at <http://www.stocktonet.com/groups/asparagus>, or send an e-mail to WhyteNews@aol.com.

CONNECTICUT

Windsor Shad Derby Festival—Town Green, Windsor. Shad is the largest member of the herring family, with a

ALASKA

40th Kodiak Crab Festival—Downtown Kodiak. In the old days, people unfamiliar with the king crab mistook it for a "strange sea spider that was not fit to eat." A taste of this delectable shellfish quickly changed their minds. Today, people come to Kodiak Island by air and sea for five days of feasting on great Alaskan seafood and watching parades and races. May 22–26. Call 907/486-5557.

ARIZONA

4th Annual Hava-Salsa Challenge—Windsor Beach State Park, Lake Havasu City. The hot and spicy fun starts with a Friday Night Fiesta, when preparations begin for the deep-pit barbecue; music and entertainment is provided by a Mexican folkloric dance group. On Saturday, more than 30 salsa makers compete for best salsa against a backdrop of live bands and Mexican and Native American dancers. April 11–12. Call Pat Reinhardt at 520/680-0221.

ARKANSAS

14th Annual Dermott Crawfish Festival—Downtown Dermott. Besides mountains of what the locals call mudbugs, creekcrabs, crayfish, or crawdads, attractions include a Crawfish Festival Beauty Pageant, a prison band, folk music and dance, and numerous children's events. May 16–17. Call 501/538-5656.

tawny, fine-grained flesh and an intricate bone structure that can be hard to fillet. But don't worry: the shad served at the festival is expertly boned, a nearly lost art that's demonstrated on the spot. May 17. Call 860/688-5165.

FLORIDA

Zellwood Sweet Corn Festival—Ponkan Road, Zellwood. Orange County grows some of the finest sweet corn in the world, and at this all-you-can-eat festival, it's served hot, buttered, and juicy. Admission price also includes a ham dinner, plus there'll be country bands, corn eating contests, food booths, arts and crafts, and amusement rides. May 17–18. Call 407/886-0014.

ILLINOIS

19th Annual Conference of the International Association of Culinary Professionals—Chicago. With the theme "Culinary Crossroads: Culture, Tradition, Pleasure," the conference celebrates unique ethnic foods, cooking styles, and culinary traditions of many of the world's diverse cultures. April 16–20. Call 502/581-9786.

LOUISIANA

The Breaux Bridge Crawfish Festival—Breaux Bridge. Come to the "Crawfish Capital of the World" for succulent, miniature freshwater lobsters cooked Cajun-style. Sample crawfish boiled in seawater and cayenne pepper, crawfish étouffée (crawfish tails gently stewed with scallops, onions, and spices, served with white rice), crawfish dogs (étouffée on a hot dog roll), and crawfish pies (étouffée in a pastry turnover). May 2–4. Call 318/332-6655.

MASSACHUSETTS

Cheesemaking Workshops—New England Cheesemaking Supply Company, Ashfield. These one-day introductory workshops cover basic principles of home cheesemaking, use and care of equipment, and what types of milk to use. Includes a full day of cheesemaking: Gouda, *fromage blanc*, mozzarella, *crème fraîche*, *queso blanco*, mascarpone, ricotta, whey cheeses and more. March 8, April 12, May 17. To register, call 413/628-3808.

MICHIGAN

The National Morel Mushroom Festival—Sunset Park, Boyne City. Seminar and guided foraging for wild edibles, National Morel Mushroom Hunting Championship, morel auction, guided morel tours, and the Taste of Boyne, with local restaurants serving their morel specialties. May 15–17. Call 616/582-6222.

NEW YORK

James Beard Foundation Culinary Events—New York City. Call 800/36-BEARD or 212/675-4984 for information about the following four events:

◆ **The James Beard Journalism**

Awards Dinner—Essex House. This annual dinner, with a "Great Resort Chefs of America" theme, recognizes excellent food writing in U.S. magazines and newspapers. May 2.

◆ **James Beard's 94th Birthday Dinner**—May 4 (call for location).

◆ **7th Annual James Beard Foundation Awards & Gala Reception**—The Marriott Marquis. Saluting top U.S. chefs, restaurants, cookbook authors, and restaurant designers. May 5.

◆ **James Beard Foundation's 3rd Annual Mediterranean Culinary Festival**—The Winter Garden at the World Financial Center. May 9–10.

OHIO

23rd Old-Fashioned Ice Cream Festival—State Route 13, Utica. The Italians first invented ice cream in the 16th century; today it's considered the United States' national dessert, with nearly two billion gallons consumed each year. The festival held in honor of this classic dessert includes free admission to the Museum of Milling and Ice Cream, the selection and crowning of the Ice Cream Festival queen and court, ice cream eating contests, parades, sheepherding with border collies, and much more. May 24–26. Call Howard Stone at 614/892-3463.

PENNSYLVANIA

Rhubarb Festival—Kitchen Kettle Village, Intercourse. Rhubarb has become a staple of traditional Pennsylvania Dutch cooking, finding its way into pies, cakes, sauces, and savory dishes. Highlights of the festival include a rhubarb pie throw, recipe contest, and a plethora of rhubarb dishes. May 17. Call 800/732-3538.

RHODE ISLAND

10th Anniversary Taste of the Nation—Rhode Island Convention Center, Providence. A gourmet food and wine tasting event sponsored by Share Our Strength to benefit hunger relief. April 30. Call 401/826-3073.

Taste of Block Island Seafood Festival—Harbor Baptist Church, Block Island. June 21. Call 800/383-2474 or 401/466-2982.

TENNESSEE

Cosby Ramp Festival—Kineaubista Hill, Cosby. Called "the vilest-smelling, sweetest-tasting weed in East Tennessee," the ramp is a wild leek that tastes like a strong onion crossed with garlic. Ramps are fried in fatback with scrambled egg and served with thick slices of fatback bacon and crusty cornbread. May 3. Call Duaine Click at 423/623-0786.

VERMONT

30th Vermont Maple Festival—St. Albans. A weekend of celebrations and exhibits centering on the first Vermont harvest of the new year. April 25–27. Call 802/524-5800.

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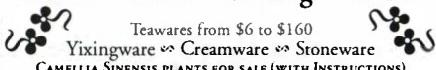
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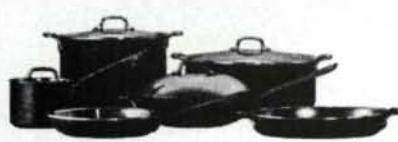


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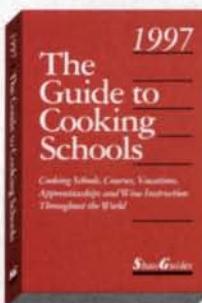
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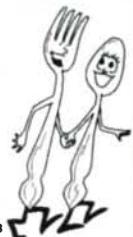
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NUTRITION INFORMATION

Recipe (analysis per serving)	Page	Calories		Protein (g)	Carb (g)	Fats (g)				Chol (mg)	Sodium (mg)	Fiber (g)	Notes
		total	from fat			total	sat	mono	poly				
Butter Lettuce, Watercress & Parsley	31	200	180	2	3	20	3	15	2	0	550	2	
Spring Vegetable Navarin	32	360	80	14	54	9	5	3	1	20	480	12	
Rosemary-Scented Morels	32	45	35	1	3	4.0	2.5	1.0	0	10	180	1	
Galette of Spring Greens w/Goat Cheese	32	100	40	4	10	4.5	2.5	1.0	0.5	45	150	1	per galette
Fresh Cherry Clafoutis	32	180	50	5	26	6	3	2	0	95	60	1	based on 8 portions
Herb- & Wine-Braised Shoulder Chops	37	430	170	36	22	19	5	10	2	105	1250	4	
Broiled Herb Marinated Lamb Rib Chops	37	260	180	19	2	20	4	13	2	70	410	0	
Spice-Crusted Lamb Loin Chops	37	370	250	26	6	27	6	15	6	95	550	1	
Wild Rice Pilaf with Dried Apricots	39	360	180	10	43	20	7	7	5	25	520	6	
Barley & Wild Mushroom Pilaf	40	290	70	8	50	8	1	5	1	0	160	9	
Saffron-Scented Millet Pilaf	40	310	110	7	41	13	2	8	2	0	350	5	
Dorothy's Classic Burger	43	250	110	31	0	13	5	6	1	95	470	0	beef only
Dairy Hollow House Cornbread	46	290	130	5	34	15	4	4	6	35	340	2	
Ronni's Kentucky Buttermilk Cornbread	47	200	65	5	27	7	4	2	1	45	480	2	
Double-Corn Tex-Mex Cornbread	47	340	160	10	37	18	7	5	6	50	500	3	
Chocolate Pudding from "Home"	49	650	540	7	29	60	35	19	2	350	120	1	based on 8 portions
Pollo Alcaparrado (Braised Chicken)	52	400	210	32	14	23	5	12	4	95	880	3	based on 6 portions
Tunisian-Style Chickpea Soup	53	620	210	22	85	23	3	14	4	0	2260	12	
Scandinavian-Style Potato Salad	54	340	110	14	46	12	3	6	3	215	530	5	
Caper Butter	55	90	90	0	0	10	6	3	0	30	40	0	per tablespoon
Fried Onion Rings	58	370	210	5	32	24	4	12	6	0	90	2	
Fried Shrimp	59	600	310	42	26	35	7	17	9	435	970	1	
Cocktail Sauce	59	15	0	0	4	0	0	0	0	0	150	0	per tablespoon
Hushpuppies	59	260	120	6	30	14	3	7	4	30	480	3	per 6 hushpuppies
Apple Fritters	60	500	260	6	56	29	6	14	7	110	170	4	
Chocolate-Lined Profiteroles	71	330	160	6	41	18	10	6	1	85	120	3	per serving

The nutritional analyses have been calculated by a registered dietitian at The Food Consulting Company of San Diego, California. When a recipe gives a choice of ingredients, the first choice is the one used in

the calculations. Optional ingredients and those listed without a specific quantity are not included. When a range of ingredient amounts or servings is given, the smaller amount or portion is used.

A Matzo Ball to Call My Own

Grandma Rae's matzo balls are legendary in my family. Cloudlike and ethereal, more angel's food than the cake that bears that name. Grandma was hailed as the high priestess of *knaidlach*, a veritable kitchen goddess.

Now that Grandma was gone, it became important for me to summon her back through her recipes. With Passover fast approaching, recreating her matzo balls became most urgent.

Years before, I'd written the recipe down as Grandma recited it from memory. This was the recipe I followed religiously. Yet all I got were hockey pucks.

Flabbergasted, I examined the directions, looking in vain for my error. My bafflement turned to frustration, and then, woefully, to that most deplorable of cook's attitudes: suspicion. Grandma must have purposely omitted some ingredient, some direction, to make sure only she could make her perfect matzo balls.

I steamed as I scraped my latest botched batch into the trash. Grandma loomed in my mind like a matzo monster, greedily slurping up all the family's culinary glory for herself. What was her secret?

"I won't rest until I've unraveled your ruse," I raged, pointing my worn wooden spoon menacingly at Grandma's photo. Then I remem-



bered that the spoon I was flailing was once hers. Flooded with happy memories of Grandma in the kitchen, I burst into tears.

In a state of obvious matzo ball emergency, I called Aunt Norma, whose matzo balls almost rivaled Grandma's.

Aunt Norma shocked me by saying she didn't use Grandma's recipe. She insisted that the only recipe that worked for her was the one on

home, and followed the recipe to the letter.

It didn't help. Not one bit. I called Aunt Norma for more advice.

"It's probably the eggs," she said matter-of-factly.

Eggs?

"Don't use supermarket eggs, use farm-fresh. And beat them more than the recipe says, until they're foamy."

Foamy farm-fresh eggs, I scribbled down.

**My bafflement turned to suspicion:
Grandma must have purposely omitted
some ingredient, some direction.**

a certain brand of matzo meal. She was so indebted to this recipe that if one store didn't have the brand, she went from market to market to find it.

I dutifully sought out the chosen matzo meal, raced

"And don't use the large eggs like the recipe says. Use jumbo. It makes the matzo balls richer. Of course, you'll have more liquid, souse a little less than the half cup of water the recipe says."

Less water, I wrote. I asked her if there was anything else, and we both began to giggle. Aunt Norma wasn't following the recipe she had insisted on at all.

"Gently stir the matzo meal a little at a time so you don't overwork it. The recipe says to use a cup, but it might be more, it might be less. You'll know the right consistency when you see it."

I did know. Didn't my eyes always detect the exact moment to stop mixing my honey cake batter? Likewise, didn't my hands sense how much flour to add to my challah dough before it became too dry? Eggs, even if labeled one size, are never identical; flour and meals have different moisture contents at different times of the year. Because nature is indifferent to recipes, we are wise to bring our own nature to the task.

Yes, Grandma had left things out of her recipe: touch, feel, instinct. And for this recipe, I was going to have to learn them for myself, as I had with countless others.

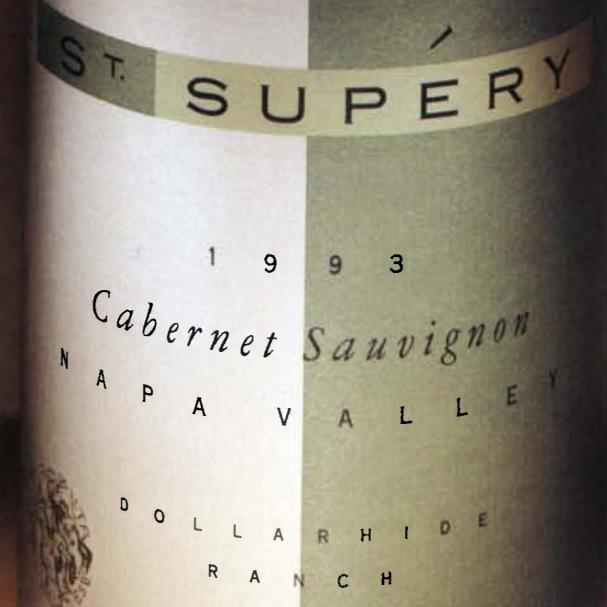
On Passover night, I made matzo balls. They weren't perfect like Grandma's. They were perfect like mine.

As for Grandma's matzo ball recipe, I found out later that my mother had discovered the original after Grandma had died. Stuffed in the back of her kitchen drawer was the recipe from the back of a matzo meal box, which Grandma had carefully torn off and saved.

Nancy Ring, a former pastry chef, is the author of Walking on Walnuts (Bantam Books, 1996). ♦

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To make tortelloni, Josephine uses a pastry wheel to divide a large pasta sheet into equal squares. Next she quickly pipes a dollop of lobster filling onto each square. Fast work is essential: if the pasta sheet dries out, it can't be shaped and must be thrown away.



A careful, neat fold from corner to corner is the first step in shaping the wonderfully fat tortelloni (tortellini's big brother).



Josephine lays the pasta triangle on a cutting board and trims it with a pastry cutter into a half-moon shape.



Josephine, a native of Puglia, learned to shape pasta from her grandmother. These lobster-filled tortelloni and eggplant ravioli are just a small sample of a day's work.



She finishes the pasta by wrapping the half moon around an index finger and gently pushing the two ends together to make a hat shape.

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